

CATALYSTS AND TRIGGERS IN LIFELONG LEARNING

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Abstract

This thesis aims to understand the catalysts and triggers that influence engagement in lifelong learning amongst adult learners undertaking access courses in the South Wales Valleys. As they are conceptualised within this thesis, catalysts and triggers pertain to how returners to formal learning explain their encounters with environmental influences, personal circumstances and shaping events throughout their lives. Together they constitute two interrelated influences in the lives of returners to learning that, when analysed, offer insight into learner participation and reengagement. The initial part of this thesis draws on a broad range of adult education literature to clarify the context of lifelong learning from the historical development of adult education to present initiatives, while exploring the development of the geographic region this study is situated in to contextualise some of the wider influences that may impact upon individual learner's reengagement. The latter component of the literature review draws together the previous research on more individual aspects of adult learner participation including motivation, lifespan development theory, learning careers work and research into learner trajectories. While much existing research is more functionalist in nature, failing to capture the perspective of the learners themselves, this research study eschews the deterministic conceptions of learner engagement by being situated within an interpretivist paradigm and focusing on deriving meaning from learners' lived experiences. The work adopts an interpretive interactionist perspective with a focus on creating meaning in social contexts and how individuals approach formal learning on the basis of prior personal experiences. The empirical data is collected via interviews with local South Wales adult education tutors and group interviews with access to higher education students at local further education colleges, which are supplemented by critical life path documents completed by the students. Key findings, derived through a grounded theory approach, and contributions to the literature in this field centre around the rich individual experiences of learners and the development of a conceptual framework outlining the diverse personal influences articulated by the learners and the convergence of multiple catalysts and triggers resulting in a powerful range of emotions and learning community engagement. The originality of the work lies in the interdisciplinary approach, the methods employed and the insights it provides into the unique influences on these participants'

reengagement decisions in this context. The development of this framework constitutes an original contribution to knowledge as it has been constructed interpretively from the lived experience of learners, it offers greater contextual insight than existing models of participation and it focuses specifically on access learners and the context of the South Wales Valleys.

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Chapter 1 – Introduction

1.1 Chapter overview

Let us think of education as the means of developing our greatest abilities, because in each of us there is a private hope and dream which, fulfilled, can be translated into benefit for everyone and greater strength for our nation. (John F. Kennedy, Proclamation 3422, American Education Week, 25 July 1961).

President John F. Kennedy highlighted the importance of education in the 1960s and since then, both in the 20th and into the 21st century, it has remained a key issue and yet, adult participation remains an area requiring much further insight and investigation. From a policy perspective it has been argued that lifelong learning is one of the “most powerful philosophies of our time” (Longworth and Davies, 1996, p. 107 cited in Marks, 2000, p. 366). Its influence is reported to “[open] up new opportunities and new horizons, empowering people and expanding ideas, concepts and actions” (Longworth and Davies, 1996, p. 107 cited in Marks, 2000, p 366).

It is argued that in a society based on a lifelong learning culture, “everyone should be able, motivated and actively encouraged to learn throughout life” (McKenzie and Wurzburg, 1997, p. 13 cited in De La Harpe and Radloff, 2000, p. 169). Although admirable, this statement appears to be somewhat aspirational, or even utopian, in the light of equality of access issues alluded to in later discussion. These commentaries on the importance of lifelong learning paint a vivid picture of an emancipatory process that raises up the goals of citizens and the development of society. In doing so, they also award the provision of lifelong learning activities with high esteem. This thesis will illustrate that while these aims are consistently woven throughout adult education literature, the methods through which these might be achieved, and the aspirations that should be attained, are at times contestable

This chapter provides an overview of the research context and the structure of the thesis. Specifically, section 1.2 introduces the topic area by highlighting the imperative of adult education and section 1.3 outlines the aims and objectives for the research. This is followed by a brief introduction to lifelong learning and a discussion of the rationale for investigating catalysts and triggers. A summary of the

underpinning research philosophy and research methods employed in the study is outlined in section 1.5. An overview of the thesis structure is then presented as a guide to the chapters that follow. This introductory chapter concludes with a reflection on the importance of researching catalysts and triggers in lifelong learning, particularly in the context of the South Wales Valleys, an imperative explored in greater depth in chapter 2.

1.2 Introduction to the topic area - The importance of adult education

Research on elementary and secondary education has largely ignored the topic [of participation] and in the higher education arena it has seldom been considered of major importance. Yet participation is central to theory and practice in adult education because the great majority of adults are voluntary learners. (Darkenwald and Merriam, 1982)

Despite the lofty affirmations of proponents of lifelong learning, the reality of adult participation in lifelong learning and provision of support have been fraught with difficulties. Wider policy ambitions advocate the notion of a learning society and access for all, but individual participation can be a more perilous issue. The responsibility for adult education is balanced between individuals, employers and the state and unlike schooling or conventional higher education, adult learning has never been purely a public responsibility (Field, 2006). Dearing (1997, p. 8) emphasised education as life enriching and desirable in its own right, and “fundamental to the achievement of an improved quality of life in the UK”. De La Harpe and Radloff (2000) expand on this principle, highlighting that social, political and economic prosperity stem from the establishment of a learning society.

A review of the literature on lifelong learning and associated sub-topics (such as barriers to participation in adult education, motivation and learning pathways) provides evidence of significant research into adult participation and motivations for taking part but with less exploration of the specific influences on re-entry into and engagement in lifelong learning. Previous work across a range of disciplines has looked at the impact of crises across the lifespan on adult learning, identity conflict in adulthood, the construction of learner biographies and influences on later life learning but always with a broader focus than the key question of what prompts involvement

in the first place, and the associated decision-making processes. As a result, there is a significant gap in the literature which this thesis aims to address in view of the importance of lifelong learning both in a policy context and more importantly in light of the emancipatory potential it holds for individual learners who engage with educational opportunities throughout their lifespan.

This thesis specifically focuses on the geographical and cultural context of lifelong learning in South Wales. Adult education has a long and embedded history in the context of South Wales and one that is intertwined with its origins of rapid industrial development in the Valleys and the subsequent decline of industry. Despite the long-standing presence of adult education in the region, the industrial and economic history compounded by the geographic terrain have resulted in a set of situational circumstances today that include high unemployment, limited availability of jobs and low levels of basic skills attainment (Saunders *et al.*, 2013). The need for ongoing engagement with adult education and lifelong learning across the population within this region can be argued to be pressing.

1.3 Aims and objectives

Research aim

To understand the catalysts and triggers that influence engagement in lifelong learning amongst adult learners undertaking access courses in the South Wales Valleys.

Research questions

- 1) What personal and environmental circumstances act as a catalyst to influence adult learners' engagement in undertaking access courses in the South Wales Valleys?
- 2) How do events during the life experience of a learner trigger their decisions to undertake formal adult education in the context of access students in the South Wales Valleys?
- 3) What interplay of catalysts and triggers in the experience of these learners act to prompt their reengagement?

1.4 Rationale for investigating catalysts and triggers

In order to address the three research questions this thesis explores the experiences of adult learners undertaking access to higher education courses in the South Wales Valleys of the UK, with a view to developing a detailed picture of the influences on their reengagement from their perspectives. The influences and circumstances that prompt participation and shape learner identities and learning journeys are termed catalysts and triggers in the context of this research¹. The term catalyst is applied generically in education literature to symbolise stimulating learning through curriculum design and the use of technology (see for example Isernhagen (1999) and Davis *et al.* (1997)), but has not been deployed specifically in relation to adult education engagement. To clarify the application of this term, a definition is borrowed from the natural sciences: a catalyst precipitates a chemical reaction between substances without undergoing any change itself. It is the precipitation of change that is relevant in this research and the change pertains to engagement with educational opportunities. Given this definition and metaphor from chemistry, a range of personal and environmental circumstances might be termed catalysts for education reengagement. These contextual circumstances can include direct personal situations and relationships such as employment and family, influences at the local community level and be situated more widely in the context of the current economic climate.

A second concept of trigger is introduced, which the Oxford Dictionary defines as “an event that is the cause of a particular action, process or situation”. In the context of this research, a trigger represents a particular experience that has prompted engagement with adult education. The concept of a trigger has been deployed in adult education literature by authors such as Aslanian and Brickell (1980), Aslanian (1988),

¹ The terms catalysts and triggers were previously employed in a project undertaken as a collaboration between BBC Wales, the University of Glamorgan’s Centre for Lifelong Learning and NIACE Dysgu Cymru, aiming to investigate lifelong learning themes that inspire interest amongst older learners. This project employed the constructs of triggers for developmental change put forward by Kloep *et al.* (2009).

Walters (2000), Crossan *et al.* (2003) and Jarvis (2004) whereby a crisis occurs across the lifespan and a return to learning can be found.

Catalysts and triggers as they are conceptualised within this thesis pertain to environmental influences, personal circumstances, and shaping events as they are encountered by returners to formal learning across their individual learner trajectories. Together they constitute two interrelated elements that, when analysed, offer insight into learner participation and reengagement and these concepts will be explored in greater theoretical depth in chapter 3 and empirically in chapters 5 and 6.

This thesis draws on a wide range of adult education literature, lifespan development theory and social psychology perspectives thereby offering an interdisciplinary insight to inform the development of a broad conceptual framework and the development of relevant findings from the learner experience. The originality of the work therefore arises in part from the interdisciplinary synthesis of perspectives.

This exploration of such catalysts and triggers is achieved by conducting in-depth, semi-structured interviews and focus groups with students participating in access to higher education courses in this particular geographical context. Access courses have been selected for this research given the targeted reengagement goals and focused learner trajectory towards higher education participation frequently associated with access students, the context of which is explored in more depth in section 2.6. Focus groups, which form a key aspect of this work, hold much appeal for lifelong learning research (Field, 2000) and invite the elicitation of rich qualitative data needed to address the present research questions and align with the methodological underpinnings of the study.

1.5 Overview of underpinning research philosophy and associated methods

This research study is situated within an interpretivist paradigm and focuses on deriving meaning from learners' lived experiences. The work adopts an interpretive interactionist perspective with a focus on creating meaning in social contexts and how individuals engage with learning through personal and wider influences around them (Denzin, 2001). The illumination of turning point experiences constitutes a key

interest of this approach (Denzin, 2004), which is particularly relevant to this study. The life history approach further offers much relevance in the context of the process of reflexivity and interpretation that individuals assign to their past, present and future experiences (Musson, 2006). The methods employed within the study include semi-structured interviews, group interviews and an adaptation of the critical incident technique. The data is collected across five phases and analysed using a grounded theory approach, consistent with the methodology. A desire for integrity throughout the research process underpins the entire study (Macfarlane, 2009). All of this is explicated in greater detail in chapter 4.

1.6 Overview of the thesis structure

This thesis is structured around seven chapters, including this introductory one. Chapter 2 considers lifelong learning in the context of societal forces and presents literature on the historical development of lifelong learning, the origins of adult education in Wales and the specific regional context of the South Wales Valleys where this study is situated. The literature review then explores the potential benefits of participation in adult education and competing drivers of economic prosperity and workforce development versus a more humanistic approach emphasising emancipation, barriers to participation and the development and role of the access course to establish the macro context of the work being undertaken. The purpose of this chapter is to examine and build a picture of the environmental catalysts that may impact upon students locally.

Chapter 3 focuses on theoretical perspectives on learning and the individual and introduces literature on learner motivation, lifespan development theory, the concept of crises across the lifespan and an exploration of catalysts and triggers within existing research in this domain, the concept of careership and the learning career and research into learner trajectories. This chapter highlights the breadth of existing research while demonstrating the need for more focused research into catalysts and triggers in this geographic context, embracing the idea of personal trajectory in relation to an individual's learner journey as opposed to a more deterministic and predictive conceptualisation of trajectories, and the meaning students assign to their experiences around current and ongoing engagement. This chapter concludes with the

development of a conceptual framework that encapsulates diagrammatically the influences that may constitute learner catalysts and triggers to be explored empirically through this research.

Chapter 4 provides an overview of the methodology underpinning the study, articulating the interpretivist stance adopted and the symbolic interactionist and interpretive interactionist perspectives employed. An exploration of the highly relevant life history method is offered along with details of the specific research methods used and the role of the critical incident technique. This is followed by an overview of both data collection methods and grounded data analysis approaches utilised in order to facilitate the detailed investigation and search for the meaning articulated by the learners in this study and the perspectives of local adult education tutors.

Chapter 5 presents the findings that emerge from the semi-structured interviews conducted with 16 local adult education tutors and supporters of adult education. These findings encapsulate five broad themes around wider environmental influences, constraining and enabling forces, tutor empathy and their sensitivity towards students, the transformative power of education and a range of aspects around individual participation. The tutor interviews offer valuable insight into the wider contextual circumstances potentially influencing learners and shaping their reengagement. These findings help to begin building a picture of potential catalysts and triggers within this geographical and historical context and reinforce the need to extract the rich perspective of learners themselves.

Chapter 6 addresses the findings from the analysis of the empirical student data collected through focus groups and supported by the critical life path documents. Themes emerge around wider environmental issues, the experience of compulsory schooling, the emotions influencing and motivations driving the students, influences and events during their life courses and aspects of undertaking the course from application to ongoing engagement. These findings provide detailed insight into individual learner experiences and the meaning they attach to them, past and present, and allow the conceptualisation of relevant catalysts and triggers in this context.

Chapter 7 clarifies the focus of the research and provides a synthesis of the preceding chapters and, most significantly, develops the conceptual framework on the basis of the rich data that emerges from chapters 5 and 6 in relation to catalysts and triggers in the context of access students in the South Wales Valleys. The chapter concludes by highlighting the specific contributions to knowledge made by this thesis in terms of the synthesis of literature, application of method and insight into catalysts and triggers and outlines limitations of the study and proposed avenues for further research pertaining to this field.

1.7 Chapter summary and link to chapter 2

This chapter has provided an introduction to the aim and objectives of the research in conjunction with an overview of the methodological underpinnings of this thesis. The terms catalyst and trigger have been briefly introduced in the context of learner engagement alongside a clarification of the imperative for further investigation into participation in adult education. As just one illustration it is argued that:

Everywhere in the world statements identify adult education as a key to the survival of humankind in the 21st century, attributing adult education with the kind of magic to contribute positively to education for all...and yet, almost everywhere in the world, adult education is a widely neglected and feeble part of the official educational scene. (Giere and Piet, 1997, pp. 3-4 in Field, 2006).

Through examining the research questions this thesis will address some of these omissions through a contextually informed consideration of learners' personal trajectories. In order to begin addressing these issues, and in line with Giere and Piet's concerns, the following chapter considers how policy ambitions, combined with active development and neglect, have influenced the development of formal adult learning provision in Wales. This overview of the geographical and historical context offers insight into the unique situation of the South Wales Valleys and begins to consider some of the macro environmental forces that may shape individual learners' reengagement and sense of meaning.

Chapter 2. Adult Education: The historical and societal context

2.1 Chapter overview

Lifelong learning holds much power to emancipate and yet more research is needed into key aspects of it such as participation and learner engagement. Such research seems particularly prescient in a geographic area steeped in a rich history of working class education but plagued by post-industrialisation realities. This chapter begins by exploring the economic development of the South Wales Valleys, where this study is situated, to articulate some of the current challenges facing the region, many of which are rooted in its industrial past. This is followed by an overview of the historical development of adult education, with a specific focus on South Wales at section 2.3, a history that is integrally linked to the industrial heritage of the region. Section 2.4 examines the rhetoric of lifelong learning in current policy discourse and this is followed by an introduction to potential barriers facing learners at section 2.5, many of which have the potential to resonate with participants in this study. Section 2.6 focuses specifically on widening participation and discusses the development and role of the access to higher education course, which forms a key basis for the empirical research in this study. The chapter concludes with an overview of the economic and historical issues that have shaped lifelong learning today and specifically their relevance to individual learner participation, an area that will be explored in chapter 3.

2.2. The economic development of the South Wales Valleys

The South Wales Valleys represent a key focus for this research and it is important to understand their vibrant and subsequently turbulent history to develop a picture of the current strengths and obstacles facing the locality and potential learners situated within it. The Wales Spatial Plan (Welsh Government, 2008) refers to the Heads of the Valleys as “an area set in superb natural surroundings...facing very considerable social challenges created by economic restructuring of the late 20th century” (Gaunt, 2011, p. 3). Gaunt (2011) highlights some challenges facing the area as a shortage of jobs; relatively low levels of professional and managerial jobs; relatively low levels of current qualifications and progression to higher education; relatively low economic activity rates; relatively high levels of economic inactivity; and, relatively high levels

of sickness and disability. Many of these issues have their roots in historical development.

Industrially, iron production played a large role in revolutionising and populating South Wales (Burge, 2000; Jenkins, 2002). Jenkins (2002, p. 221) reports that by 1840, there were approximately 150,000 people who depended directly on the works at the heads of the valleys and more widely within this new society close to 200,000 relied upon the “monstrous iron furnaces and hellish pits”. Although both iron and steel played a significant part in Welsh industrial development, coal undeniably played the most crucial role in expansion (Jenkins, 2002).

In conjunction with the rapid expansion in industrial production, dramatic growth in population is also evident during this period. In terms of employment, the local coalfields employed 150,000 men in 1900, a figure rising to 250,000 by 1914 (Jenkins, 2002). Burge (2000) reports a peak of colliery labour at 271,000 in 1920 and these represent crucial figures to reflect on once coal production begins to diminish. Conflict during the 1870s left miners facing low wages and dangerous working conditions with mortality rates increasing and safety inspections falling (Jenkins, 2002). A turning point is evident in 1898 with the creation of the South Wales Mining Federation, known as the ‘Fed’, whose specific impact on adult education will be explored in section 2.3. These developments in terms of population growth, the intensification of the growing lucrative industry, changing working conditions and the lack of support offered by employers resulted in the region becoming a hotbed of early adult education.

In contrast to the rapid industrial growth witnessed during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the 1920s saw a stark economic crash (Jenkins, 2002). As a consequence Merthyr Tydfil recorded the second highest unemployment rate across the UK in 1932 (Burge, 2000). The impact of this filtered its way through society, resulting in a reduction in the maintenance of public service as well as smaller voluntary contributions to charitable bodies and religious organisations, all of which had a detrimental effect on the communities they served (Evans, 2000; Jenkins, 2002). The resulting history developed beyond an economic crisis to encapsulate an emerging social crisis.

Although a revival in Welsh industry was evident in the 1960s, nevertheless the size of the workforce continued to shrink (Burge, 2000). The mid 1970s saw a reappearance of some of the issues faced in the 1930s including high unemployment and a decline in public services. By the end of 1981, Wales reported unemployment figures of 170,000 and the long-term social impact on communities then became inescapable (Jenkins, 2002). Turner (2002) observes:

Like many other urban and rural areas in Britain, valleys communities have had to absorb the impact of rapid social change. Loss of local industries, the globalisation of the economy and the consequent widening of social divisions have left people in deprived and poverty stricken communities with a deep sense of powerlessness in the face of an increasingly complex world. (Turner, 2002, p. 106).

These deep-rooted economic and social problems are still noticeable today and Saunders *et al.* (2013) observe that a number of league tables regularly position Wales (along with the North East of England and Northern Ireland) in the top three places for lowest share of Gross Value Added (GVA), lowest productivity, lowest employment and highest economic inactivity. Their work cites Welsh Government (2007) findings that highlight marked variations by region in Wales, with 173 wards of extreme deprivation identified via the Communities First Index². A third are located in the Heads of the Valleys area, accounting for 17% of the population of South East Wales (Saunders *et al.*, 2013). Through the turn of the millennium, an industry that through 70 years of growth had turned a rural, sparsely populated region into booming towns and communities came to a rapid, ignominious end.

Following World War 2 there was a decline in the heavy industries in South Wales, and with the arrival of the Thatcher government in 1979, their fate was sadly sealed. In 2008, Tower Colliery, which had been bought by the workers in 1994, was the last coal mine to close its doors and marked the end of the industry in South Wales. (WISERD, 2008 cited in Saunders, 2013, p. 77).

² Communities First is the Welsh Government's strategy aimed at addressing poverty which is attracting funding of £75 million until March 2015. The programme is designed to reduce the divide between areas of affluence and deprivation and purportedly has three objectives: Prosperous Communities; Learning Communities; and, Healthier Communities (Welsh Government, 2014).

Despite the end of coal mining in South Wales, the descendants of the industry's workers still remain. The industrial decline and the resulting deprivation encapsulated in this illustrative quotation manifests itself in skills shortages within the region and limited availability of alternative employment. Saunders *et al.* (2013) cite 2005 and 2008 Welsh government reports in highlighting that the most crucial weakness for the Heads of the Valleys region is an advanced skills deficit. This is coupled with a relatively low basic skills and intermediate skills profile and this represents a significant educational challenge for the area due to the resulting low economic productivity, educational exclusion and social injustice (Saunders *et al.*, 2013). Concerning statistics include the lower percentage of 16 year olds achieving five or more General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) A*-C grades and the highest level of 16-24 year olds not in employment, education or training (NEETS) in Wales (Saunders *et al.*, 2013). A key target in Welsh further and higher education policy aims to raise the number of full-time and part-time Welsh-undergraduate new entrants to HE courses domiciled in the Communities First areas from 8.9 per cent in 2000/01 to 11.4 per cent by 2010/11 (Welsh Government, 2009). Initial engagement with adult education and access to higher education courses constitutes a key component of achieving these targets.

Although this section has highlighted the industrial growth and subsequent decline, and the increasing need for adult education in a unique context, it is important to investigate the history of adult education and the strong roots linked directly to this industrial development in the tradition(s) of working class education due to their interlinked nature.

2.3 The historical development of adult education

In terms of lifelong learning, the mining communities of South Wales have a long history. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries these communities set up miners' institutes, libraries and cinemas that have been described as "one of the world's greatest networks of cultural institutions created by working people anywhere in the world" (Rose, 2001, p. 237). This development was driven by the economic and social circumstances evident at the time. The libraries and institutes were established,

funded and run by the local communities they served (Tannock, 2009). Some less prominent contributors to adult education that warrant recollection include Sunday schools, political parties, local education authorities and co-operative societies (Davies, 2003).

The history of adult education in the context of South Wales is inextricably linked to the industrial and economic development outlined in section 2.2. In order to convey some of the magnitude associated with the concept, Davies (2003, p. 101) is worth quoting at length. He writes, “the relative innocuousness of the term ‘adult education’, with its connotations of evening classes offering a second chance at qualification gathering, instruction in practical skills, off-the-job training or the opportunity to acquire the basic linguistic requirements for added holiday enjoyment, can sometimes obscure its deeper significance for political and social empowerment”. It is this emphasis on both political and social empowerment evident in original late nineteenth and early twentieth century adult education in South Wales that constitutes the initial attention of this section.

The tradition of adult education is deep-rooted in South Wales and local community responses to perceived social injustice and economic unrest have historically been associated with requests for meaningful and directed adult education (Davies, 2003). It was believed that through such adult learning, a real change in the collective experience could be achieved (Davies, 2003; Fieldhouse, 1996). While some criticism has been targeted at workers education for focusing too much on the collective experience rather than on the notion of personal betterment, the movements to mobilise adult education have been extensive despite evidence of differing motivations and ideals.

During the first half of the twentieth century, a number of traditions with regard to adult education existed across Wales with a threefold vision of: educational improvement, personal enhancement and community enlargement (Evans, 2000, p. 122). During the early part of the century, two discrete traditions of workers’ education emerged, the Workers Education Association (WEA) and Independent Working-Class Education (IWCE), which fought against one another. The different traditions of adult education were perceived as “either a method of encouraging social

harmony, fostering social revolt or imposing social control” (Davies, 2003, p. 102). Evans (2000) reiterates this splintering between those who welcomed university involvement in the form of facilities and tutors versus the more radical who opposed university involvement. A compromise involved the voluntary sector working with the state system (Lewis, 1993).

The Workers Education Association (WEA) was founded in 1903 in the UK with a commitment to “provide access to education and learning for adults from all backgrounds, and in particular those who have previously missed out on education” (WEA, 2009). The WEA had the express purpose of providing impartial education about political, social, historical and economic issues through the leadership of courses by university-calibre tutors (Davies, 2003). 1906 saw the first Welsh branch forming in Barry with an autonomous South Wales region of the WEA forming in 1907 (Davies, 2003).

The impartiality of WEA class offerings, although genuinely designed to support working-class students to understand the current social order and foster their capacity to study, brought it into conflict with more militant individuals and organisations in Wales who sought to overthrow the existing social order (Davies, 2003). The South Wales Valleys became a key centre of a more Marxist approach associated with Independent Working Class Education (Evans, 2000). Davies (2003, p. 105) remarks that “this was a period that... coincided with immense upheavals in the mining industry and its dependent communities, not the least of which were the foundation of the first area-wide trade union and its emerging militancy; the Tonypandy Riots; the dabbling in ideas of syndicalism, industrial unionism and workers’ control; and the emergence of the Labour Party”. Such socialist groups were forming in the local area as a result of the existing industrial decline and poor working conditions. IWCE offered a vibrant approach to learning that was welcomed by the South Wales Mining Federation (SWMF) or the ‘Fed’ (Davies, 2003). Initially miners attended Ruskin College in Oxford, which, established in 1899 as a specifically ‘Labour College’, was designed to “educate men and women to raise rather than rise out of their class” (Davies, 2003, p. 106). By 1906 the SWMF sponsored students to attend Ruskin and attendees were always carefully selected for their willingness to communicate their learning to fellow miners on their return.

Those selected to attend Ruskin were reportedly politically aware and well read. In the words of Davies (2003), much of this reading would have been undertaken in miners' halls or institutes that became prominent features situated in almost every village and town across the industrial region. These institutes are described as "true cradles of adult education, the libraries of these buildings often provided the only access, certainly before the advent of public library provision in the 1920s, to literature, learning and ideas" (Davies, 2003, p. 106). In 1909, a strike took place at Ruskin (after it was accused of being too pro-establishment) that confirmed a more radical positioning of adult education resulting in the formation of the Plebs League and ultimately the creation of an alternative institution, the Central Labour College (CLC) in London (Davies, 2003; Lewis, 1993).

Ultimately the National Council of Labour Colleges (NCLC) was formed which represented a national network of working classes. Simon (1992, p. 20) reflects on the criticisms leveraged by each side highlighting that the WEA accused the Labour College movement of "indoctrinating students with dogmatic conceptions about the nature of society" while advocates of the NCLC accused the WEA of being overly impartial which resulted in confusing workers and distracting them from the class struggle. Although their ideologies are markedly different, both traditions embraced commitment to the collective ideal and viewed the purpose of adult education, not to aid social mobility of individuals from their class background but instead, to "raise the working class in general" (Lewis, 1993, p. xvi).

It can be seen that the domain of workers' education was historically an area of "bitter ideological struggle" between the factions not least because the WEA, which expanded rapidly during the 1920s, drew state funding and tutors from universities as opposed to from the working class (Milliband, 1982, p. 91). Evans (2000, p. 123) reports that by 1933 the WEA had "become a major cultural institution and a powerful political and social base in South Wales, with over 200 WEA classes and more than 4,000 students". The founding of Coleg Harlech in 1927 represents the most impressive example of the collaborative approach. As a result of partnership between university colleges and the WEA, the new college for working men opened in 1927 with the admittance of ten students. Within ten years Coleg Harlech had

grown into a thriving institution with 220 students having attended the college, 209 of whom were Welsh and 91 were miners (Evans, 2000, p. 123).

During the 1930s, a time termed the ‘devil’s decade’, when the mining industry experienced deep depression (as outlined in section 2.2), a number of ‘social service’ responses constituted further aspects of adult education development in South Wales (Davies, 2003, p. 111). Three key aspects include the educational settlement phenomenon, the activities of the Carnegie Trust and the university extension movement.

Educational settlements reportedly began to develop during the 1920s, exhibiting similar goals to the original university settlements of the late nineteenth century, particularly the shared aspiration of the mutual benefit that can derive from interaction between university graduates and working people within the community (Davies, 2003). Reportedly 27 new settlements were created between 1920 and 1939, with nine of them located in South Wales, with the intention they would offer self-help opportunities to the local community. Among a range of criticisms, some is levelled against the narrowness of a predominantly arts and humanities curriculum, especially during a period of “economic and social catastrophe” (Davies, 2003, p. 114).

Second, the work by the Carnegie Trust faced similar critique. An initiative designed to grant funds to be spent on adult education in the coalfields of Durham and South Wales, a political dimension entered the agenda which was to oppose the work of the ‘Fed’ (Davies, 2003) which had become increasingly radical. Davies (2003) argues that although the work was intended to be apolitical and had a somewhat limited scope, it did at least serve to highlight the benefits of community learning

Third, the university extension movement, through which university tutors brought their experiences to communities within Wales, represents a further tradition of adult education aimed at educational and community development (Evans, 2000). In the Welsh context although the university extension movement from Oxford and Cambridge began in the 1860s, it started to take hold in Wales at the start of the twentieth century with the first educational settlement in Wales opening in Splott in

1901 in order to provide a university presence in the community (Davies, 2003). A key goal of the university extension movement was to deflect members of the working class from the radical writing of Marx, Engels and other socialist authors and instead to advocate more moderate thinking on citizenship and community. Learning settlements, just one type of autonomous adult learning group, essentially constituted the establishment of a settlement in a deprived area run by middle-class workers who were college educated. Their mission was threefold: “to study the lives of the poor, to generate public awareness about their plight and to press for civic improvement” (Brookfield, 1995, p. 93).

As evidenced in the criticisms voiced against the above initiatives, there was a lack of unanimity about the most appropriate focus of adult education even in the early part of the previous century, rooted in the conflicting socialist and 'apolitical' approaches which emphasised the cultural and social development of the working classes in South Wales. In parallel, debate about liberal educational ideals versus more vocational underpinnings is also long-standing. Turning away from conceptions of adult education momentarily and reflecting upon solely university provision, liberal education is described as having underpinned higher education institutions in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Wiener, 1985; Barnett, 1986 in Lomas, 1997). Hirst (1965 in Lomas, 1997, p. 111), a key promoter of liberal education, defines it as being:

Based on the nature of knowledge itself, and not on the predilections of pupils (students), the demands of society, or the whims of politicians. Liberal education is concerned with developing the mind and helping students to understand their culture.

Whitehead (1929, p. 139 and 145 in Ramsden, 2003, p. 21) makes reference to students thinking critically and he proposes that higher education should be of relevance to the knowledge economy and also the community. A view that is commensurate with that of many commentators today. Elias and Merriam (1995 in Hannon, 2005, p. 110) suggest that the goal of liberal education is to “convert information into knowledge, and knowledge into wisdom”, citing that wisdom is a “truly educated state” and noting that “it comes in two forms: practical and theoretical”. Pring (1995, p. 6) writes that “lack of economic

utility”, which can be associated with the theoretical perspective, “is frequently seen as a hallmark of liberal education”. There is then a tension between the theoretical and practical perspectives which link to educational function and teaching method (Bierema, 2001). In examining the alleged tension between liberal and vocational education, Pring (1995, p. 189) argues:

There is a mistaken tendency to define education by contrasting it with what is seen to be opposite and incompatible. ‘Liberal’ is contrasted with vocational as if the vocational, **properly taught**, cannot itself be liberating – a way into those forms of knowledge through which a person is freed from ignorance, and opened to new imaginings, new possibilities: the craftsman who finds aesthetic delight in the object of his craft, the technician who sees the science behind the artefact, the reflective teacher making theoretical sense of practice. (Emphasis in original)

Returning briefly to the function of education, Lomas (1997) summarises the four key purposes of higher education as outlined by the Robbins Committee (1963). These are to: “develop in students the necessary skills so that they [can] play their part in the division of labour; promote the general powers of the mind; advance learning; and, transmit a common culture and standards of citizenship” (Lomas, 1997, p. 111). The second and third aims are closely aligned with the concept of liberal education defined by Hirst above.

Parallels can be drawn between historical adult education development and current debates within higher education and lifelong learning domains. Lomas (1997) draws on a range of commentators when proposing that those who advocate liberal education may be branded as ‘elitists’ who are denouncing vocational education. In UK education policy, the conservative Thatcher government is attributed with a move from traditional liberal ideals to an emphasis on courses impacting upon the economy (Lomas, 1997). Lomas (1997, p. 113) draws on Jessup (1991) and Jamieson (1985) in highlighting this new model of education emphasises the “knowing how” rather than the “knowing what” and the shift from “knowledge accumulation towards skill acquisition”. Armstrong and Miller (2006, p. 294) report a shift towards economic rather than social purposes for education during the late 1970s in conjunction with an international economic recession and with the UK, a move to the political right under the conservative leadership of Margaret Thatcher. During the 1980s, as pressure

increased on local authorities to cut spending on non-statutory services, support for more liberal education became increasingly squeezed (Tuckett, 1991) and as a result, addressing unemployment became a predominant task for adult educators (Field, 2006).

In discussing the friction between academic freedom and government accountability, Lomas (1997, p. 111) draws on the work of Tapper and Salter (1995) who consider this “an ideological struggle between those who regard HEIs as having a primarily economic purpose and those who are concerned to protect the ‘traditional liberal ideal’”. Maher and Graves (2008) draw on a range of evidence to reinforce that employability is not a new area for debate in higher education and that explicit reference to the labour market is evident in the 1963 Robbins Report. Commentators such as Lees (2002) propose controversy around the employability debate has re-illuminated a fundamental divide between the view of the academic and the view of government on what education is for.

Despite the emancipatory and transformational roots of adult education aligned with broad liberal ideals, when exploring students’ reasons for engaging in adult education, many of these motivations appear vocationally orientated. In terms of lifelong learning in South Wales, Davies (2003, p. 122) offers a compelling argument that “much more remains to be achieved, particularly in the Valleys of the South Wales Coalfield where, regrettably, HE presence has, in the past, been sparse” and more widely, debate persists about the cultural, social and community purposes and benefits of adult education.

2.4 Lifelong learning: the benefits and competing drivers

As outlined in the introductory chapter, from a policy perspective it has been argued that lifelong learning, as it is now fashionably termed, is one of the “most powerful philosophies of our time” with an influence reported to “[open] up new opportunities and new horizons, empowering people and expanding ideas, concepts and actions” (Longworth and Davies, 1996, p. 107 cited in Marks, 2000, p. 366). It is worth noting that lifelong learning is the term more commonly used in today’s education discourse to imply adult education. The term lifelong learning encapsulates the concept of

learning from cradle to grave whereas adult education is very much associated with learning for those post-18. These terms are nevertheless used synonymously and interchangeably

In terms of specific terminology, McGivney (1991) draws on research undertaken by the Further Education Unit to classify contemporary adult education and training into the following categories:

- Work-centred (geared largely to the needs of a single employer);
- Work-focused (designed to give entry to a particular occupation);
- Work-enabling (helping people to re-enter the labour market);
- Work-related (aimed at enhancing the position of minorities in the labour market);
- Academically qualifying (providing a progression route into higher education);
- Community-related (not specifically job related by leading to capacity-building in a particular community); and
- Leisure-related (often known as non-vocational and non-assessed adult education).

Although a comprehensive list, it can be argued that these classifications do not make explicit reference to the idea of learning for personal growth in the context of more liberal educational aspirations outlined above.

Jarvis (2004, p. 44 citing Hostler, 1977, p. 58) observes that the terms adult education and the education of adults are sometimes used interchangeably and this is particularly evident in American literature on the subject. Within the United Kingdom the terms have potentially very different meanings and this is attributable to the history of adult education within this national context. Jarvis (2004, p. 44) writes, “the term ‘adult education’ carries specific connotations in the United Kingdom, which imply that it is specifically liberal education, which has been stereotyped as a middle class leisure time pursuit”. Although much adult learning does take place during leisure time, this should not limit the scope or type of learning that takes place. It could be further argued that this renders lifelong learning inaccessible to those from

non-middle class backgrounds and perpetuates the exclusivity of it, a key dimension to consider when examining participation. If one reflects on the history of adult education in the context of Wales however, as detailed in section 2.3, the origins of adult education are strongly linked to working class communities. Biesta (2006, p. 173) argues that lifelong learning is a concept that “means many things to many people and often means more than one thing at a time”. In examining the discourse of lifelong learning, Biesta (2005, p. 688) proposes there is a growing emphasis on individuals needing to take responsibility for their own learning, rather than the state being required to resource the activity.

It is important to acknowledge that definitions of the term ‘adult’ abound, with a number of commentators discussing the different conceptions. Wiltshire (1976) proposes that adult education constitutes an educational process conducted in an adult manner by learners over the age of twenty who are characterised by maturity and experience. Paterson (1979) and Legge (1982) question the dividing line between children and adults and debate the application of the ‘lifelong’ concept so prevalent in the literature. It is problematic to make distinctions based on maturity and experience, but it is also pragmatically useful to identify age ranges of learners when categorising theory and evidence. Schuller and Watson (2009) offer a useful conception of stages encompassing the lifelong concept of cradle to grave by clarifying four age classifications: up to 25; 25 to 50; 50 to 75; and 75 plus.

Moving away from a discussion of age and the concept of lifelong learning, the notion of community education is a further term in this arena requiring clarification. Community itself is a word that incites much discussion and the notion of community education is open to a similar level of debate. Jarvis (2004, p. 57) highlights three types of education with the potential to constitute community education. They include: education for action and/or development; education in the community; and extramural forms of education. Much of the early adult education work within South Wales can be can be categorised under the auspices of community education.

In addition to such complexity with community education, there is a need to clarify the boundaries between formal and informal learning. McGivney (1999) and Malcolm *et al.* (2003) note frequent overlaps – not even the physical learning environment,

when formal learning can take place in an informal setting (such as a village hall) and vice versa, delineates them. Percy (1997), drawing on Coombs *et al.* (1973) and Gunn (1987), summarises a tripartite learning model: formal learning is associated with systems of organised learning from primary schooling to higher education; non-formal learning is any education taking place outside the formal system with clearly defined learning objectives and identifiable learners (often through community groups and voluntary organisations); and informal learning is associated with gaining knowledge, skills and values from daily experience. Informal learning is evidently unique from formal and non-formal learning and constitutes an especially diverse and broad remit (McGivney, 1999; Coffield, 2000). Due to the nebulous nature of the concept, challenges are associated with capturing evidence – and yet it is informal learning that often lies at the heart of initial reengagement by adult learners.

Field (2006, p. 1) writes that lifelong learning “is a beautifully simple idea” as people essentially learn throughout their lives from infancy through adulthood. It is not however a new idea:

It is commonplace to say that education should not cease when one leaves school. The point of this commonplace is that the purpose of school organisation is to insure the continuation of education by organising the powers that insure growth. The inclination to learn from life itself and to make the condition of life such that all will learn in the process of living is the finest product of schooling. (Dewey, 1916 cited in Field, 2006: 51).

The concept of lifelong education, the reported predecessor of lifelong learning, came to the fore in the 1972 UNESCO Faure Report entitled ‘Learning to Be’ (Faure, 1972; Boshier, 1998). According to Tight (1996), the UNESCO report yielded the notion of learning throughout life a ‘master concept’. Lifelong learning, in its current guise, entered policy discussion during the 1990s (Field, 2006). When the Commission of the European Communities declared 1996 to be the European Year of Lifelong Learning, “the idea rapidly re-entered the mainstream political vocabulary, but with an interesting linguistic shift: rather than lifelong education as in the 1970s, all the talk was now of lifelong learning” (Field, 2006, p. 2). Field (2006), alongside other commentators, observes definitional difficulties with the term due to its broad and all-encompassing nature. It can be argued that the emphasis placed on ‘learning’ rather

than ‘education’ or ‘teaching’ does however contextualise the activity that takes place (Field, 2006).

The Dearing Report (1997) placed lifelong learning at the centre of policy debate within the UK, emphasising the need for commitment from individuals, the state and employers as well as education and training providers. In 1998 separate Green Papers outlined proposals for Wales, Scotland and England and the White Paper (Learning to Succeed) for post-16 education and training in England followed. In the same year Fryer’s 1998 advisory group established an ambitious and inclusive vision and emphasised:

Lifelong learning should be for all aspects of life and meet a variety of needs and objectives. It should foster personal and collective development, stimulate achievement, encourage creativity, provide and enhance skills, contribute to the enlargement of knowledge itself, enhance cultural and leisure pursuits and underpin citizenship and independent living. (Fryer, 1998: (Principle 4) Variety and Diversity – Part 3: Core Point 5).

A number of policy initiatives followed the Fryer Reports, with a particular emphasis on increasing participation rates amongst adults. Schuller and Watson (2009) proposed the aforementioned four key stages (up to 25; 25-50; 50-75; and, 75+) in their educational life course model, advising lifelong learning policy should not be overly front-loaded to the detriment of older age groups.

The competing drivers: economy versus equality

Valuable reminders about lifelong learning in the UK emerge from analysis of policies around the globe in order to compare and contrast approaches. By way of illustration, Okumoto (2004 in Field, 2006, p. 38) examines British and Japanese lifelong learning policies in the context of social and economic history. Her findings identify that Japanese policy emphasises community building and social reconstruction while the British approach is more attuned to economic development. Field (2006, p. 39) concludes that while there is a difference in national policy approaches, many “economically advanced nations face similar challenges”. These challenges frequently pertain to economic productivity as the driving force behind

adult development, a far cry from the original visions of adult education for personal enhancement and community enlargement (Evans, 2000).

There is without doubt a growing concern with the functional imperative of lifelong learning – either as a source of competitive advantage or as a more humanistic approach that combats poverty and alienation. Bagnall (2005) and Field (2006) articulate a dualistic perspective for lifelong learning: the economic dimension and the emancipatory. This raises the question of whether the two conceptions are mutually exclusive and whether individuals can in fact be personally ‘emancipated’ in the context of economic productivity. It should be noted that lifelong learning can play an important role in offering solutions to the unemployed and to those experiencing redundancy and it can offer governmental organisations an outlet for this human capital. Compelling research by Illeris (2003, 2006) suggests however that schemes that make engagement with learning opportunities compulsory against the will of the learner will not succeed and they in fact go against the very principle of lifelong learning.

There nevertheless exists a discourse that articulates the extent to which adult education can impact positively on the creation of an efficient, more productive workforce that can move from one employment sector to another. Emphasis has been placed over the last several decades on the concept of transferable skills in accordance with economic patterns (Kemp and Seagraves, 1995) and in an increasingly volatile employment market the onus is on individuals to assume increasing ownership of their employability skills (Maher and Graves, 2008).

While different goals and functions have been discussed in relation to initiatives in Wales and wider policy thrusts, these all potentially imply that participation is equal and open to all and it is important to recognise that this is often not the case for all citizens. Given the benefits that can result from engagement in lifelong learning at an individual and societal level (see Feineston *et al.*, 2008), it is imperative to consider initial access and reasons for participation. In the context of participation in higher education specifically (as opposed to other types of post-compulsory education), Greenbank (2006) cites findings from Robertson and Hillman (1997), Hayton and Paczuska (2002), the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE)

(2003), Trowler (2003) and Blanden and Machin (2004), highlighting the continued issue of low participation rates amongst 'lower' social classes. Access to higher education remains a key public policy issue and the intentions of government are frequently asserted "in terms of social justice, equality of opportunity, and economic prosperity at the levels of both the individual and the nation" (Tonks and Farr, 2003, p. 26).

Findings from the UK wide NIACE annual survey (2008) reported in Malin and Hunt (2010) highlight a correlation between socio-economic class and participation in adult learning. Individuals in higher groups ABC1 were identified as significantly more likely to undertake learning than those in lower groups (C2DE). The findings also indicate that in Wales in 2008, 70 per cent of those in groups DE, the lowest socioeconomic groups, were unlikely to engage in any learning in the future. Malin and Hunt (2010) cite studies highlighting a correlation between non-extension of education beyond schooling and non-participation with adult education opportunities. It is worth returning to McGivney (2001) who cites a list of groups under-represented in adult education: those with poor school experiences; those receiving benefits; people who are on the fringes of the labour market; part-time employees on low incomes; people with disabilities; and older people. Given this lack of equity and under-representation, it is imperative to give this further attention, specifically in light of the ongoing socio-economic situation in the South Wales Valleys.

Caution must be advised however when looking at some of the evidence (Graves *et al.*, 2011). As a commentator, Gorard (2005) is critical of research undertaken within the area of access. He argues that much work in this area draws on small samples and fails to justify its narrow focus. In criticising one such study on the issue of under-representation of non-traditional students in higher education, Gorard (2005, p. 4) comments, "this work is not alone. It is typical of an entire genre of UK research that eschews numeric considerations, and simply accepts that the problems described by others are genuine ones". Gorard's work warns researchers to be careful about making assumptions with some of the access data. In addition, he offers further criticism of published studies produced by members of practitioner communities who are not necessarily trained researchers, leading to two very separate cultures surrounding the collection and interpretation of evidence.

While some criticism of work with perhaps an inconsistent methodology or research that seeks to generalise without evidence from a suitable sample size warrants this critique, this does not mean that the insights of different communities are irrelevant. Rigour in application of research methods is important but existing work can invite qualitative research to delve further into these issues as a starting point for understanding say, learners' actual experiences in more depth. What is inescapable is the need to research with integrity (Macfarlane, 2009). Despite the need to acknowledge the caveats issued by Gorard (2005), lower education participation rates amongst populations with disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds nevertheless pervade adult education and higher education. This identification of inequality renders the exploration of participation and motivation imperative from an equity and social justice perspective, especially if the goals of lifelong learning are to be realised.

2.5 Barriers to participation

More pragmatically, and somewhat in contrast to the more optimistic and arguably utopian ideals, Selwyn and Gorard (2002) write on the barriers to creating a learning society by highlighting the variables that impact upon adult participation in learning. Their work cites Harrison (1993) who places the barriers into three categories: situational (associated with lifestyle) (Carp *et al.*, 1974; Darkenwald and Merriam, 1982); institutional (associated with availability of opportunities and organisational processes) (Cross, 1986; McGivney, 1990); and, dispositional (associated with the perceptions of the individual learner) (Johnstone and Rivera, 1965; Hayes and Darkenwald, 1985). Selwyn and Gorard (2002) cite McGivney (1993) and Maguire *et al.* (1993) in highlighting that cost is the most frequently asserted obstacle to participation, be it direct or indirect expense. Blair *et al.* (1995) contribute a fourth category to the above tripartite classification entitled socio-cultural barriers. A fear of perceived social disapproval instigated by participation in education that inhibits an individual's decision to take part is termed a socio-cultural barrier (Jarvis, 1985; O'Shea, 1979).

Barriers to participation in adult education have been widely reviewed by McGivney (1990) and Jarvis (2004) and include lack of time, money, confidence, childcare and

transport. They also note negative school experiences, perceived irrelevance of education and a reluctance to join formally convened day or evening classes. In discussing barriers that prevent individuals from pursuing a particular learning pathway, McGivney (1999, p. 70) also recognises the inadequacy of information and guidance; lack of clear progression routes; lack of staff encouragement; reluctance to move from a familiar local environment; negative perceptions of further and higher education institutions; inconvenient timing and location of learning programmes; and lack of support from family members.

The barriers are often therefore not structural: they can also be compounded by other non-structural factors. McGivney (1999) refers specifically to confidence, perceptions of not-belonging in an educational institution and anxiety about the unknown. La Valle and Finch (1999) found that a long gap in learning history acted as a barrier in itself as 24 per cent of respondents in their study cited this break as an obstacle to pursuing future study. Saunders *et al.* (2010) identified language as a barrier for non-native English speakers, as well as negative experiences of school and a lack of confidence as barriers, in their study of adult and community learning in South Wales, reinforcing the UK-based findings of McGivney and others.

Referring specifically to the perceptions of the individual learner from Harrison's (1993) typology, Norman and Hyland (2003) argue that long-term solutions to participation issues and the learning divide can only be found by tackling the 'dispositional' barriers of anxiety, low self-esteem and guidance, an observation that highlights that adult participation warrants deeper investigation. The above categories acknowledge that there can be structural forces at play as well as more personal dimensions.

This thesis investigates the interaction between the structural and the intersection with the dispositional by taking into account elements of structure and agency when conceptualising catalysts and triggers. The research seeks to bridge the different aspects proposed by Norman and Hyland (2003) and others by exploring the 'in-between' through the investigation of the wider circumstantial catalysts that have shaped a current cohort of learners' personal learning trajectories. As a component of

this it is important to reflect on the wider environmental circumstances linked to participation.

2.6 Widening participation, educational developments within Wales and the development and role of the access course

Blanden and Machin (2004) cite Greenaway and Haynes (2003) in reporting the expansion of higher education from 400,000 students in the 1960s to 2,000,000 in 2000. Reportedly one in sixteen participated in higher education in the 1960s with one in three participating now (Greenaway and Haynes, 2003). Blanden and Machin (2004) acknowledge the view of some commentators that HE expansion is deemed positive as it impacts on national productivity and also promotes equality of opportunity as an increase in university places means more scope for those from poorer backgrounds (and other under-represented groups) to enter higher education. Their work examines specifically whether expansion has resulted in greater opportunities for low-income children or whether it has “acted to reinforce already existent inequalities in access to higher education” (Blanden and Machin, 2004, p. 231). Their work finds evidence of the latter and they report:

HE expansion has not been equally distributed across people from richer and poorer backgrounds. Rather, it has disproportionately benefited children from relatively rich families. Despite the fact that many more children from richer backgrounds participated in HE before the recent expansion of the system, the expansion has actually acted to significantly widen participation gaps between rich and poor children. (Blanden and Machin, 2004, p. 231).

These findings have implications for the government’s policy of continued expansion. Tonks and Farr (2003, p. 26) pose the question “the big issue is surely that there are whole swathes of the population who are in social conditions which mean that they are highly unlikely to get near a university – top ones or otherwise”. It is at this point that reference should be made to NEETs, a term applied to those not in education, employment or training. A report compiled by the CBI (2008) entitled titled ‘Towards a NEET solution: tackling underachievement in young people’, refers to this new and growing ‘underclass’, as it is termed by Winnett (2005). The report makes reference to the cost of NEETs being millions of pounds to the UK taxpayer each year. Rees *et*

al. (1996) applied the term ‘status zero’ in their study of jobless school leavers in South Wales. Their work concludes that the drivers and circumstances leading to ‘status-zero’ classification post-compulsory education are complex and that policy must be developed to address these diverse factors and dissuade long-term withdrawal from the labour market and rejection of training opportunities. In the context of Wales today, the percentage of NEETS aged between 16 and 24 is 17%, a figure rising to 27% in the South Wales Valleys (Saunders *et al.*, 2013).

Access to higher education remains a key public policy issue and the intentions of government are frequently asserted in the context of economic achievement, equality of opportunity and social justice at both the national and individual level (Tonks and Farr, 2003). HEFCW, the Welsh funding council, has devised a series of policies designed to widen access within Wales (HEFCW, 2014). As identified above, Greenbank (2006) cites a number of sources in highlighting the continued issue of low participation rates in higher education amongst those from lower social classes. Trowler (2003) reports that 80 per cent of young people from professional backgrounds enter higher education whereas only 10 per cent from the least skilled backgrounds participate. Greenbank (2006) cites Cooke *et al.* (2004, p. 408) who observes that despite the doubling of student numbers over the last twenty years, “the profile of the student body remain[s] the same, with the vast majority of undergraduates coming from advantaged backgrounds”. Essentially the perception of higher education being the provinces of the professional classes still remains (Layer, 2004).

This evidence is highly relevant in the context of the South Wales Valleys in light of the challenges facing the region in terms of high unemployment, low skill levels and limited availability of work and in view of observations from Davies (2003) about the sparseness of higher education presence. Reflecting on the impact of these findings, it can be argued that social and economic deprivation issues mean that despite potential opportunities, there are structural issues perpetuating barriers to participation.

Smith and Bocock (1999, p. 286) write, “Longstanding inequalities in participation rates in HE still persist despite repeated policy initiatives to overcome them”. Greenbank (2006, p. 141) cites Thomas (2001, p. 67) in noting, “it is poor

participation rates among working-class students that ‘is the most persistent failing of the post-compulsory education system in the UK’”. Despite a dramatic increase in participation driven primarily by political imperative, the social mix of UK universities remains largely unchanged in the last ten to fifteen years which in turn has implications for the composition of the graduate labour market (Greenway and Haynes, 2003; Wolf, 2003). The relationship between student employability and the success of the knowledge-driven economy is frequently asserted (Hawkrigde, 2005). Given the growing link between higher education and employability (Maher and Graves, 2008) a lack of equality in access to HE impacts upon the gaining of higher level skills and this goes hand-in-hand with economic opportunity.

Tett (2000) cites Scott (1995, p. 105) when discussing the impact of class and gender on participation in higher education highlighting “access to universities and colleges [in the UK] remains largely determined by social class, despite the expansion of the system and the erosion of class identities”. Hutchings and Archer (2001) cite Saunders (1990) in noting the extent to which the socio-economic composition of the population has changed during the twentieth century. Some sociologists including Holton and Turner (1989, 1994) have reportedly argued that class is becoming a “redundant issue” (Hutchings and Archer, 2001, p. 70). Walkerdine and Lucey (1989) and Skeggs (1997) argue however that, “this view ignores the very real inadequacies, power differences and oppression that continue to exist” (Hutchings and Archer, 2001, p. 70). Skeggs (1997, p. 7) pointedly observes, “To think that class does not matter is only a prerogative of those unaffected by the deprivations and exclusions it produces”. While opportunities within the education system have improved, the contextual problems within the South Wales Valleys remain and class identities have far from eroded in this area (Adamson, 2003).

As a consequence, barriers to entry into higher education for working class students can preclude them from attaining the economic benefits linked to participation in higher education (Dearing, 1997). This represents an issue of inequality that demands attention. Metcalf (1997) proposes that young people from lower social classes potentially face a double disadvantage, with an increased likelihood to take qualifications that reduce their chance of gaining access to university, resulting in a

perpetuation of the problem of individuals from this social background not gaining access to university.

Iannelli (2007, pp. 307-8) concludes from her study that “it is clear...that expanding the capacity of educational institutions to gather people from different social backgrounds does not automatically lead to an equalisation of educational opportunities”. Iannelli (2007, p. 308) cites Raftery and Hout (1993) and Heath (2000) in noting the reason for this lack of equalisation is that “children from middle class families continue to be substantially advantaged in the chances of going on in education when compared to children from other social classes”. Potential explanations for this include “children from lower social classes lack cultural, social and economic resources (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Coleman, 1988), have lower aspirations (Haller and Portes, 1973; Sewell and Hauser, 1980), and tend to have poorer school results than their more advantaged peers” (Iannelli, 2007, p. 308).

In 2001 Macdonald and Stratta noted that the meaning of widening participation in relation to higher education had shifted significantly during the preceding five or six years. Although there is evidence of a shift prior to 1997, publication of reports by Fryer (1997), Kennedy (1997) and the NCIHE (1997) cement this change. Macdonald and Stratta (2001, p. 249) summarise each of these reports as highlighting the need to expand post-16 participation in education and seeking to identify those groups who were traditionally non-participants in HE and therefore needed to be targeted in a widening participation strategy. Such groups included the unemployed, those on low incomes, those without qualifications, the unskilled, ex-offenders, part-time and temporary workers, older adults, those with literacy, numeracy or learning difficulties, disaffected youth and some minority ethnic groups (Kennedy, 1997 and Fryer, 1997 in Macdonald and Stratta, 2001). In the context of widening participation the term ‘non-traditional’ is a label that tends to include any student who does not fit the stereotype of 18-25, able-bodied, white, middle-class, free from family responsibilities with standard A-level qualifications (Webb, 1997).

The Dearing Enquiry identified those from socio-economic groups III to V, people with disabilities and specific ethnic minority groups as remaining an under-represented population within HE (NCIHE Summary Report, 1997, p. 14 in

Macdonald and Stratta, 2001). On synthesising these documents, Macdonald and Stratta (2001, p. 250) state that, “at the policy level, widening participation is aimed at making HE more accessible to a new constituency of learners and, as a consequence, the recognition of a range of routes into undergraduate study”. Tinklin (2000) cites work by Burnhill *et al.* (1990), Paterson (1991), Sammons (1995) and Metcalf (1997) in identifying a strong correlation between social background and school attainment levels, specifically that individuals from working class backgrounds are significantly less likely to gain the qualifications requisite for entry into HE. Boud (2004) proposes there is a need for higher education to find a way of responding to the diverse needs of social groups and individuals as well as the different purposes and roles of higher education.

Several initiatives have been developed within the context of South Wales in recent years in order to address some of these access issues. The Community University of the Valleys (CUV) was established in 1993 and driven by the Department of Adult Continuing Education (DACE) at the University of Swansea working collaboratively with a number of community groups and universities (Davies, 2003; Saunders *et al.*, 2013). The result was a community-based undergraduate programme that targeted those who, for a multitude of reasons, would have found it difficult to attend courses on the main university campus, and sought to encourage progression of adult learners (Saunders *et al.*, 2013). Those targeted include lone parents, the unemployed, individuals with caring responsibilities, women returners and those on low incomes and the scheme provides a range of support mechanisms including fee bursaries, IT support and childcare facilities (Davies, 2003, p. 121).

A more recent development within Wales involves the creation of the Universities Heads of the Valleys Institute (UHOVI). UHOVI is designed to expand higher education provision in the Heads of the Valleys region via engagement with individuals, employers and communities (Saunders *et al.*, 2013). The initiative is designed to distribute higher education provision into businesses, community centres, social enterprises and further education colleges and holds the overarching aim of encouraging skills and enterprise to remain within the region (Saunders *et al.*, 2013).

At a UK-wide level, access to higher education courses have developed in response to inequality of access issues related to compulsory schooling over a number of decades. Although access courses began to emerge in the late 1970s as part of a DES initiative, they gained real prominence in 1987 with the publication of the White Paper Higher Education: Meeting the Challenge (Wakeford, 1993). A significant obstacle for potential mature learners pertains to having the right entry qualifications for a programme of study (Wakeford, 1993). Access courses represent a third option to prospective mature students beyond the traditional A-level entry or vocational qualifications. Essentially an access course allows a student to prepare directly for entry to higher education through a route that bypasses A-levels or equivalent qualifications. Students undertaking access courses represent a group with a unique set of learner motivations and aspirations which are likely to differ from adult returners who may be undertaking bite-sized courses or engaging in courses such as those offered by CUV at an earlier stage of their personal reengagement trajectory.

According to figures published by Agored Cymru (publication date unknown), more than 30,000 students annually participate in full and part-time access courses in the UK and over 2,500 study in Wales. Access courses are designed to offer a ‘second chance’ in education (Agored Cymru). Access courses are designed for individuals with few or no qualifications, those who left school early or have been out of education for a number of years. The courses are intended to develop the skills required by students to cope in future educational contexts such as on higher education courses and can be used to increase self-confidence, improve problem solving skills and enhance career prospects (Agored Cymru).

In her study of access learners, Wakeford (1993) reports that two-thirds of the participants undertook their course with the intention of progressing to higher education. Wakeford (1993, p. 217) concludes from her survey that higher education represents a “major motivating factor and endpoint” for access students. Wakeford (1993) reports that access courses represent a route for thousands of mature students annually to pursue higher education and courses have grown in numbers and in variety of subject to include social sciences, maths, science and technology.

Findings in the Access to Higher Education Report (QAA, 2013) however suggest a recent decrease in access provision within the UK, with total numbers of Access to HE providers falling from 346 in 2010-11 to 343 in 2011-12. The number of courses being offered decreased between 2010-11 and 2011-12 by 24 in nursing and medically related fields and reduced by 16 courses in areas termed ‘other health, public services and care. Findings from the Access to Higher Education Report (QAA, 2013) provide an overview of the learner profile for academic year 2011-12. Reportedly 73% of access learners were female during this academic year and 27% male, representing a 1% shift from the previous year. 67% of learners completed their chosen access programme in 2011/12 and evidence suggests that proportionately fewer first and upper second-class degrees are awarded to students who enter HE via the access route (QAA 2013).

Moving discussion away from a focus solely on access, Hinton (2011) has undertaken research to explore higher education aspirations and student mobilities in Wales. Her work explores student decision-making on where to study on the basis of their emotional connections with home. A number of students reported the desire to move away from home conflicted with their Welsh identity. A number of participants in Hinton’s study were able to reconcile this conflict by relocating within Wales. While the notion of aspiration is very topical in current policy and in relation to lifelong learning catalysts and triggers, the findings of this study are relevant but of limited applicability to the learners in this study. As discussed at length in chapters 5 and 6, mobility is not an option for the vast majority of students in this research as their personal circumstances tie them geographically to within a small radius of where they currently reside. They may have aspirations to relocate but are not practically able to do so.

2.7 Chapter summary and link to chapter 3

This chapter has explored the industrial development of the South Wales Valleys and highlighted some of the economic, social and skills challenges facing the region to begin contextualising potential wider influences on learner reengagement. Section 2.3 has examined the historical development of adult education and highlights the tradition(s) of adult education in Wales. A discussion about the concept of lifelong

learning has also been introduced alongside reflections on the potential barriers to participation at both a personal dispositional level and more structurally. The focus of this chapter has been on providing a backdrop of adult education, the South Wales Valleys and the role of the access course to set the context of potential circumstantial catalysts that may influence the learners who form the basis of this study to include the impact of local unemployment and high skill level challenges as just two examples. In contextualising some potential wider circumstantial catalysts this chapter has also situated the concept of lifelong learning by examining it beyond a purely functional capacity. While this section has supported an understanding of the breadth of wider environmental and circumstantial catalysts for adult learning provision in the context of the South Wales Valleys, it has further illustrated the need for an investigation of more individual aspects of participation in order to develop a detailed picture from the learner perspective and this constitutes the focus of chapter 3.

This chapter has highlighted a number of potential implications for access policy and provision within the local region. It would seem that the local area is no longer the radical hotbed of adult education it once was historically despite the ongoing challenges such as skills deficits and high numbers of NEETs facing Valleys communities and policy makers. Although local response to crisis has historically been associated with requests for meaningful and directed adult education (Davies, 2003), such a collective desire does not seem to be presently evident. Davies (200) argues that much more needs to be achieved in terms of higher education attainment levels within South Wales and targets exist to encourage HE participation for those from Communities First areas. Contextual problems and class identities in the South Wales Valleys remain (Adamson, 2003) and there is wider evidence of a correlation between social background and school attainment and a reduced likelihood to gain entry to higher education. In light of a growing policy emphasis on individuals' needing to take responsibility for their own learning (Biesta, 2005) and recent policy thrust that lifelong learning should be for all and not overly front-loaded to the detriment of older age groups, it would seem that access courses, representing a third entry route option for mature learners and offering a second chance to many, have a crucial role to play.

Chapter 3. Theoretical perspectives on learning and the individual

3.1 Chapter overview

While chapter 2 explored the industrial development of the South Wales Valleys, the heritage of adult education rooted in the coalfields and the current discourse of lifelong learning, this chapter considers lifelong learning, and participation and engagement in particular, from a more individual perspective in order to build a picture of the potential catalysts and triggers landscape experienced by learners. The historical and broader sociological perspective, while valuable, fails to answer the question why do individuals feel they need to learn. This chapter focuses on the motivation and development of the individual to set the theoretical context for an exploration of catalysts and triggers. Section 3.2 considers motivation in the context of education, paying particular attention to the neglect of adults in education and reflecting on critical commentaries of motivation theories. Section 3.3 focuses on lifespan development theory and participation in adult education. Section 3.4 looks at the notion of the learning career while section 3.5 looks at existing work on learner trajectories. Having examined a range of literature to establish the landscape around adult participation in lifelong learning, section 3.6 looks specifically at the notion of crisis in relation to catalysts and triggers research. Section 3.7 synthesises the existing body of literature to clarify the case for investigating catalysts and triggers in the context of individual learner experiences in order to further extend our understanding of adult participation in access courses and to develop a conceptual framework.

3.2 Motivation in the context of educational engagement

Houle (1961, p. 7) proposes that, “no other subject is more widely pondered and discussed by people interested in the education of adults than the motives which lead men and women to introduce systematic learning into the patterns of their lives”. Despite the abundance of research about early years, childhood and adolescent learning (Piaget, 1964; Kohlberg, 1969; Vygotsky, 1978), little is still known about the transformational power of education in later life and much research focuses quite superficially on reasons for taking part. Adult participation in education is often

neglected in terms of both research and policy and where attention is paid, it often attracts more of a scattergun approach than similar interest in youth participation.

Work undertaken by Courtney (1992) to synthesise research into participation in adult education demonstrates a multitude of studies investigating such participation over the last few decades although many of them are quite superficial in nature, focusing in the main on description-based work or surveys. Boeren *et al.* (2010) argue that the choice for adult learners to participate in education is the result of a complex and sensitive decision-making process. They further suggest that those with a high need for learning participate very little and draw on Van Wounsel (2006) in proposing that the most vulnerable groups represent those least likely to participate. Swain and Hammond (2011, p. 592) draw on the work of NIACE to argue that provision for part-time and mature students is frequently regarded as, “the least resourced, least valued and least understood”.

When exploring why adults learn, Courtney (1992) argues there are two ways to conceptualise this. The first relates to discovering the origin of the need to learn and the second links to the conditions that foster engagement with formal educational opportunities. In Courtney’s (1992) view, theory on adult participation should address learning need and the steps leading to participation in order to be insightful. Three categories of theory are identified: decision models, life cycle theory and motivational orientations. Decision models are “independent conceptualisations which break down the conditions governing the act of participation into different elements, some personal and psychological, others social and sociological” (Courtney, 1992, p. 53). As a result the focus in decision models is on the decision leading to engagement rather than the actual motivation for participation. Studies commensurate with this approach include Love (1953), Boyd (1960, 1965), Miller (1967), Boshier (1973), Rubenson (1978), Grotelueschen and Caulley (1977), Cross (1981), Darkenwald and Merriam (1982), and Cookson (1983, 1986).

The life cycle theory, or lifespan development psychology theory, is associated with transitional phases in the lifespan and is explored in greater depth in section 3.3 of this chapter. Adult education research associated with lifespan development is linked with studies by Havinghurst and Orr (1956), Havinghurst (1963), Knox and Videbeck

(1963), Phifer (1964), Marple (1969) and Aslanian and Brickell (1980) among others. The third category Courtney (1992) conceptualises is associated with motivational orientations. This theory is linked with Houle's (1961) tripartite typology, categorising learners as goal-oriented, activity-oriented and learning-oriented, and personality as a determinant in participation. In addition to Houle's (1961) work, studies linked to motivation orientation have been undertaken by Sheffield (1962), Boshier (1971, 1976, 1980), Burgess (1971), Grabowski (1972), Morstain and Smart (1974), Dickinson and Clark (1975), Ordos (1980), Goodnow (1982), Boshier and Collins (1985) and Clayton and Smith (1987). Blair *et al.* (1995) have developed a more recent conceptualisation of adult participation that merges work on motivation and existing research into life transitions.

Motivation is investigated by a number of commentators and researchers, and is discussed at length by Brookfield (1983) and Smith and Spurling (2003) among others. Motivation itself is a term with multiple meanings and can relate to underlying reasons for participating in adult education or the actual engagement of a learner with course material and the subject matter (Swain and Hammond, 2011). Ahl (2006) offers a compelling and critical argument that motivation should not be seen as "something residing within the individual" but instead conceptualises it as "a construct of those who see it lacking in others" (Ahl, 2006, p. 385). In the context of adult education she argues that utilising the term motivation can in fact stigmatise those who are classified as 'unmotivated' and this in turn yields the concept of motivation as a euphemism for both direction and control (Ahl, 2006).

Her work argues that theories associated with motivation in adult education are rooted in six types of classical motivation theories: economic human (where increased motivation is linked to financial reward – a construct that can be critiqued in part because humans do not always act rationally (March and Olsen, 1989)); social human (in which social factors such as group dynamics serve to satisfy emotional need in addition to purely financial incentive – see the work of Mayo (1933) on the Hawthorne Experiments); psycho-biological human (links motivation to notions of instinct and drive – sometimes connecting animal and human behaviour and involving primate studies); learning human (linked to the idea of learned behaviour associated with a stimuli that can in turn be translated into motivation terms – key theorists

include Pavlov, Thorndike and Skinner); need driven human (in which human behaviour is argued to be motivated by innate needs such as self-actualisation according to Maslow (1987), affiliation, achievement and power according to McClelland (1961) and Herzberg's (1966) motivating factors to induce a sense of achievement and recognition); and, cognitive human (where individual cognition influences behaviour and motivation in turn – theories include self-efficacy work by Dweck (2000) and attribution theory as just two examples).

Ahl (2006) links this review of classical motivation theories and examines how motivation is conceptualised in adult education theory. Her work concludes that much of the literature is rooted in industrial psychology and it is simply utilised for this different application in the context of learning rather than employment. Work on adult educational motivation reportedly draws extensively on the cognitive elements of these theories. Notably Dweck's (2000) work on early school experience and resulting low self-confidence reports an impact on motivation to learn later in life. Aspects of behaviourist theory and economic factors are also present as evidenced in links between engaging in education for promotion and financial reward (Ahl, 2006 drawing on Knowles, 1980). The social human theory also plays a role on two levels: one, in regard to social norms associated with participation determinants and two, in relation to the role of the peer group in encouraging educational completion (Wlodkowski, 1999 and Ahl, 2006). Needs based theories also feature strongly, assuming that individuals have an intrinsic need to learn (Ahl, 2006) and this builds on the work of both Maslow (1987) and Rogers (1967) in terms of the need for self-realisation.

Ahl (2006) argues that many of these theories assume an innate need to learn and that latent study motivation can be attributed to three types of hindering factors: dispositional, situational and structural - factors that are outlined in section 2.5 as barriers to participation in lifelong learning. Ahl is highly critical of theory that assumes the removal of these barriers will enable motivation to resurface, especially as many of the suggestions to overcome the barriers are pedagogical, which presupposes a return to learning in order to achieve intervention. Ahl (2006) proposes a tripartite critique of motivation theory. First, it assumes Western, and therefore, individualistic perspective of humans. Secondly, many of the theories are male-

centred. Thirdly, motivation can be used as an instrument of power to control people. Ahl (2006, p. 402) argues that:

Abandoning the search for motivation as essence, and looking at it instead as a relational and discursive concept, opens up new vistas for social science and adult education research... it reveals the operations of power, and shows how the discourse on lifelong learning as a necessary response to economic and technological determinism constructs the adult learner as insufficient or inadequate.

Herzberg's (1966) two-factor theory, one of the theories stemming from the idea that humans are needs driven, has paved the foundations of contemporary theories about inner and outer motivation and intrinsic and extrinsic rewards. Commentators such as O'Connor (1987) and Silverstein *et al.* (2001) argue that motivation can be classified as being expressive or instrumental. Expressive motivation is associated with personal development while instrumental is associated with motivation rooted in skills training and career pathways. The work of Eccles *et al.* (1998) extends the intrinsic (internally driven) and extrinsic (externally driven) dichotomy while Schunk *et al.* (2002) argue for seeing these motivation classifications on a spectrum (Swain and Hammond, 2011). Swain and Hammond (2011) theorise that intrinsic and extrinsic motivations are by no means mutually exclusive. The notions of internality versus externality are of interest when examining reasons cited by adults returning to learning, especially in the context of individual and wider societal forces. Swain and Hammond (2011, p. 594) choose to conceptualise motivation in the context of an individual's life course situated within wider "historic and geographical" circumstances.

Researchers such as Johnstone and Rivera (1965) and Burgess (1974) and a number of other authors have developed categories of motives for adult participation (see table 1). Jarvis (2004) asserts that although different typologies are utilised by different commentators, they nevertheless yield similar findings associated with the social function of education. The findings of Johnstone and Rivera (1965) and Burgess (1974) are comparable with more recent findings compiled by Scala (1996) who examines reasons for returning to higher education in learners over the age of 60.

Table 1. Classifications of participation reasons/motives

Boshier (1971) - Social relationships - External expectations - Social welfare - Professional development/advancement - Escape/stimulation - Cognitive interest	Burgess (1974) A desire: - To know - To reach a personal, social or religious goal - To take part in a social activity - To escape - To comply with formal requirements	Silverstein <i>et al.</i> (2001) - Seeking intellectual stimulation - Learning for the sake of learning - Desire simply for additional education	Houle (1961) – Three learning orientations: - Goal-oriented learners: Seek to achieve a specific purpose through pursuit of education - Activity-oriented learners: engage in education for non-education related purposes such as social interaction - Learning-oriented learners: Seek to gain new knowledge	Jackson and Jamieson (2009) - Interest in the subject - To develop as a person - To get a recognised qualification - To change type of work - As a stepping stone to future learning - To meet people
Johnstone and Rivera (1965) - To prepare for a new job - To help with present job - To become better informed - Spare time enjoyment - To help with home centred tasks - To help with other everyday tasks - To meet new people - To escape daily routine	Sargant <i>et al.</i> (1997) Three broad categories for motivation: - Work - Personal development - Progression	Scala (1996) - Enrichment/love of learning - Fill void after life changes - Interest in course/subject - Job training/to get a degree - Always wanted to go to college - To explore new options - Mental stimulation/activity	Swain and Hammond (2011) - To gain a recognised qualification - Increase future employment options and opportunities - New job/career change - Improvement of current job - To enable further study - To gain specific skills (either for work or study) - To gain opportunities to live abroad - To pursue interest in the subject - To do something different - Proving to self – and/or to others - Enjoyment - To be in a stimulating environment - Wanting to study and do something intellectual	

Her work highlights differing motives for participation based on gender, level of prior educational attainment, employment status and interest in gaining qualifications.

Silverstein *et al.* (2001) conclude that during the 1970s and 1980s the greatest emphasis was placed on expressive motivation. More recent research identifies a growing number of older learners citing reasons that align more closely with instrumental factors (Scala, 1996). This may be unsurprising when there is a growing trend to work later and longer in life but it also reaffirms a need to investigate motives associated with older learner engagement in a changing economic and demographic climate.

Many of the categories proposed by different researchers are extremely similar (as can be seen in table 1) with significant overlap and it is challenging to distinguish between them. Additionally, many of the categories appear quite superficial, perhaps under-representing the powerful potential education holds for identity transformation. Scala (1996) valuably proposes that there is much further work to be done when exploring the motivations of older learners, a point echoed by Withnall (2006, p. 30), who emphasises a need for greater insight into:

How people make sense of their own attitudes to learning and how they have acquired beliefs and values about what education and learning mean in the context of their own lives...such an analysis would offer a distinctive perspective on the factors that might influence older people to continue or to take up learning activity.

Findings from Swain and Hammond's (2011) 18 in-depth narrative interviews with graduates who had studied part-time, yields a list of 13 motivations (see table 1). These appear to be more extensive than solely the extrinsic/intrinsic and expressive/instrumental categories. In identifying their own more extensive categories, Swain and Hammond (2011) cite the work of Feinstein *et al.* (2007) who report a fall in the category of progression and personal development and categorised a new motivation, proving to oneself.

Given the level of similarity between the different studies and categories alongside the extensive overlap, there exists a need to synthesise the different motives. The

outcome of mapping the various conceptualisations from table 1 can be seen in table 2.

Table 2. Synthesised participation motives for adult education from table 1

Participation motives and reasons	Authors
Career progression and development, including towards career change and education progression	Houle (1961), Johnstone and Rivera (1965), Burgess (1974), Scala (1996), Sargant <i>et al.</i> (1997), Jackson and Jamieson (2009), Swain and Hammond (2011), Boshier (1971)
Personal interest and development	Houle (1961), Johnstone and Rivera (1965), Burgess (1974), Scala (1996), Sargant <i>et al.</i> (1997), Silverstein <i>et al.</i> (2001), Jackson and Jamieson (2009), Swain and Hammond (2011), Boshier (1971)
Intellectual stimulation and ‘escape’	Johnstone and Rivera (1965), Burgess (1974), Scala (1996), Silverstein <i>et al.</i> (2001), Swain and Hammond (2011), Boshier (1971)
Social and religious development for the individual	Houle (1961), Johnstone and Rivera (1965), Burgess (1974), Scala (1996), Jackson and Jamieson (2009), Swain and Hammond (2011), Boshier (1971)
External pressures (not career related)	Boshier (1971)

(A symbol-coded depiction of the mapping undertaken is located at appendix A)

Houle (1961), the earliest contributor addressed here, considered a seminal contributor to theory on participation in adult education, divides adult learners into three separate learning orientations: goal-oriented learners, who seek to achieve a specific purpose through the pursuit of education; activity-oriented learners, who engage in education for non-education-related purposes such as social interaction; and learning-oriented learners, who engage for the sake of gaining new knowledge. Sargant (1997) summarises three broad categories for motivation: work; personal development; and progression offering a similar tripartite overview to Houle (1961).

Research undertaken by Jackson and Jamieson (2009) explores motivations for part-time mature students to participate in education. Participants in their study were presented with a list of potential reasons for study including among others: interest in the subject; to develop as a person; to get a recognised qualification; to change type of

work; as a stepping stone to future learning; to meet people. The three most popular motivations related to interest, personal development and obtaining a qualification. Although the findings resonate with other studies, the imposition of constructs on learners appears somewhat restrictive when articulating such unique, personal motivations. Blair *et al.* (1995) offer a critique that studies categorising individuals' objectives offer only limited insight into the processes underpinning a learner's decision to engage with adult education. In their view, motivational typologies can offer some insight into the psychological characteristics of adult learners but this does not provide a complete overview of educational return (Blair *et al.*, 1995).

In the context of lifelong learning and demography, evidence indicates that many people are encountering an increasingly unpredictable life course (McNair, 2009). This is attributed to globalisation, technology advances and social change by the Inquiry into the Future for Lifelong Learning (Schuller and Watson, 2009). There is an inevitable impact upon labour market entry and exit, with motivations to learn being influenced heavily by migration, familial relationships, caring responsibilities, and bereavement. The notion of exit is very topical with an ageing society, multiple career pathways and recession and re-entry to learning. McGivney (1999) cites a New Zealand based investigation by Harre Hindmarsh and Davies (1995) that looks at non-formal adult learning patterns broken down by age, gender and race. This yields three overriding patterns: a zig-zag pattern between formal and non-formal learning that has no definite longer-term progression route; a linear pattern involving movement from non-formal to formal learning; and engagement with varied non-formal learning programmes in different subject areas in a cyclical pattern.

A number of the above studies make links between participation and employment prospects and it can be argued that in those of working age, motivation can be inextricably linked to employability. Dench and Regan (2000) argue that there is a powerful connection between learning and work, but that equally a loss of work, through redundancy, for example, can act as a trigger for engaging in learning. From her study with part-time mature learners across Birkbeck College: University of London and the Open University, Jamieson (2007) argues that a greater understanding of the motivations and benefits of this learner population is still required. Jamieson (2007) cites Hockey and James (2003) in proposing that a sophisticated understanding

of how older learners articulate meaning in their lives develops from a dual focus on both structure and agency. Antikainen (1998, p. 216) cites Alheit (1994, p. 288) in arguing that:

The learning processes between structure and subjectivity are manifold, but they can only be understood if we do justice to both poles: the structural framework of conditions governing our lives and the spontaneous dispositions that we adopt towards ourselves.

Evans (2013, p. 41) more recently notes:

Life course transitions that involve changes in work and employment, up to and including retirement, are not only shaped by institutional and labour market structures. They also involve developmental tasks that challenge the individual actors as well as institutional regulations and environments.

Consequently the influence and interaction of individual and societal forces cannot be overlooked in this research when exploring learner identity and engagement. Boeren *et al.* (2010) postulate that participation decisions are linked to factors at three levels: the individual, educational provision and the socio-economic context. Their work builds on the theory of Cross (1981) who articulated a Chain of Response Model depicting a cycle of decision-making processes emphasising both psychological and environmental variables. Boeren *et al.* (2010) have synthesised a number of studies and theories, many of which are rooted in the social psychological paradigm, and propose the need to take greater account of structural elements when examining participation in adult education. This has led them to develop their model, depicted at table 3, encompassing individual, institutional, and national components of the education market. Swain and Hammond (2011) support a similar view by arguing that for an adult learner, their decision to participate represents an intersection of their historical and geographical context, much of which will be linked to structural elements. Linked to this in terms of predictors of participation, Gorard *et al.* (1998) report on the impact of family background, initial education and the time of leaving initial education on enrolment in later life and have developed a model of participation determinants which are explored in more depth in section 3.5. Sargent and Aldridge (2002) and Hammond and Feinstein (2006) report specifically on the

impact of initial education on subsequent participation. This can have a powerful influence and is addressed in depth in chapters 5 and 6.

Micro level				
Socio- economic	Socio-demographic	Socio-cultural	Psychological	Relevant others
Employment status	Gender	Cultural participation	Attitudes	Family
	Age		Motives	Employer
Occupational status	Ethnicity	Social participation	Barriers	Reference group
Income	Civil status		Confidence	Services
	Educational attainment		Satisfaction	
	Educational attainment of parents		Intentions	
Meso level				
Organisation institution		Organisation programme		
Institutional size		Group size		
Promotion		Didactics		
Attraction of disadvantaged groups		Preparational programme		
Quality system		Modular versus linear structure		
Accessible place		Theoretical versus vocational education		
Services		Study discipline		
Partnerships		Entrance conditions		
Vision and mission		APL and APEL		
		Teachers' attitude		
		Flexible learning routes		
		Enrollment fee		
Macro level				
Economic context				
Welfare context				
Labour market context				
Initial education system context				
Skill formation system context				

Table 3. Taken from Boeren, Nicaise and Baert (2010)

Recent work by Findsen *et al.* (2011) examines learner engagement in Scotland through gender and class lenses. The empirical data is collected from longitudinal tracking of 85 working class adults over the age of 50 through four biannual semi-structured interviews, a compelling methodology for such research. Their work draws

on McNair (2009) by classifying motivation in a tripartite categorisation of capital (Findsen *et al.*, 2011). Identity capital is associated with the enablement of the development of a sense of self, identity, confidence, life-purpose and enjoyment of life. Human capital in this context is associated with the development of skills and knowledge to secure and maintain employment. Lastly, social capital is conceptualised on two levels in their study: in the context of maintaining and developing relationships with friends and family and in support of interaction with the wider community. Findsen *et al.* (2011) identify identity capital as the most common motivation in their research. In terms of social capital, many learners who implied this motivation reportedly engaged to help communicate with their children and grandchildren.

In examining motivations for, and consequences of, participation in adult learning, Swain and Hammond (2011) articulate the outcomes gained by learners via the conceptualisation of four types of capital: professional capital; economic capital; personal capital; and, social capital. Their study, with graduates who had studied part-time as mature students, concluded that students possessed multiple motivations, often overlapping (from the 13 motivations detailed in table 1). A number of participants in their study spoke in terms of their educational engagement having had a profound impact on them by being life-changing and many highlighted personal capital outcomes such as increased confidence, focus and self-esteem as well as a sense of achievement. Swain and Hammond (2011) also identified that for some of their participants, their life circumstances had converged to enable them to undertake the course at the time, a finding of key interest in the context of catalysts and triggers research. In addition, their research highlighted what they term constraining and enabling factors for participation and these include circumstances such as having dependent children and experiencing poor health.

Blair *et al.* (1995, p. 630) have undertaken research to develop a new conceptualisation of adult participation in education and their study involving 50 adult learners purports to be “one of the first in the UK to examine the complexities of adult participation from a qualitative perspective”. Their work unpicks existing research into participation and merges two distinct approaches of motivational typologies and lifespan development work (an area explored in section 3.3). On the basis of

examining existing work they conclude such research does not sufficiently address an understanding of adult participation patterns and the differing approaches often fail to incorporate the insight of others (Blair *et al.*, 1995, p. 637).

In order to address the perceived deficiency that much of the earlier research does not encompass the multifaceted nature of adult participation and to encapsulate the complexity of influences on potential adult learners, Blair *et al.* (1995) have devised a model that they define as a new conceptualisation of adult participation in education. This model, depicted below in figure 1, views participation as “an outcome of the interaction of two factors in individuals’ lives: their goals and circumstances (which [the authors] call conditions)” (Blair *et al.*, 1995, p. 637). Goals are associated with anticipated outcomes and achievements hoped to be derived from participating in adult education and conditions are defined as the circumstances surrounding an adults’ life such as their age, employment situation, school experience and more. Blair *et al.* (1995) further classify goals as being either reactive – in response to a set of circumstances such as divorce or redundancy – or proactive – less in response to particular triggering events and more aligned with a general desire to improve social or economic circumstances. Conditions are then further considered in terms of supply in the context of educational provision and demand in relation to an individual’s personal circumstances facilitating educational engagement. Blair *et al.* (1995) acknowledge that the influences constituting the conditions and goals are dynamic and ever-changing and propose that participation arises from the aligned interaction of such aspirations and circumstances.

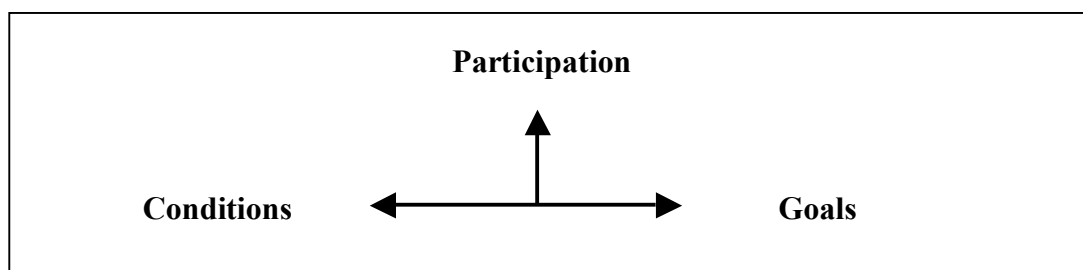


Figure 1. A model of adult participation in education taken from Blair *et al.* (1995, p. 639)

Their qualitative approach is highly applicable to the research questions in this study in that they look at the conditions in which adult participation takes place and learners’ intentions but a weakness is associated with drawing on four different

educational contexts and attempting to find commonality within these using a limited number of participants. Like Crossan *et al.*'s (2003) subsequent work, this study also presents their findings by drawing on just a handful of learner cases. In addition, while the work undertaken is qualitative in nature as opposed to many previous quantitative investigations, the terminology they employ indicates their approach is more functionalist yet the lack of synthesis and cross-cutting of findings across the learner sample makes it more challenging to consider the findings in totality. The components of their model do however offer useful insight into understanding adult participation, which provides scope to extend this work and further develop the model. As indicated in figure 1, their model generalises the elements that inform learner participation and could be further contextualised. They present the elements as coming together using unidirectional arrows and these suggest a straightforward, simple process. There may be scope to build on this basic model by conceptualising it more interactively, including the potential to indicate the fluidity of the influences and their impact.

3.3 Lifespan development theory and links with participation in adult education

While much of the material in the above section offers interesting insight into the many reasons that individuals engage in educational activities and what their personal motivations might be, some of the studies are quite fragmented and lack depth beyond superficial classifications of reasons for participation. The second category of participation theory that Courtney (1992) proposes, life cycle theory, warrants further investigation. The focus here is on maturing and declining, although this is not without its challenges, especially as life courses are reportedly becoming more complex with fewer set punctuation points (McNair, 2009).

When considering adult development, Tennant (1990) distinguishes between two theoretical thrusts in the psychological domain: intellect development and cognitive functioning as well as the development of personality and social roles. The former is linked with work on psychometric measurement (such as Baltes *et al.*, 1984), cognitive structuralism (such as Piaget, 1973) and research examining cognitive processes including problem solving and memory (Tennant, 1990). The second focus is more closely aligned with exploring social behaviour in accordance with age and

stage-based development (including the work of Havinghurst, 1972; Erikson, 1959; Loevinger, 1976).

A key dimension for lifelong learning is the notion of development that moves through stages in the lifespan (Tennant, 1990; Blair *et al.*, 1995). Maturation and stage theories dominate much lifespan research although a significant amount of the literature is focused on the development of children rather than adults (Berryman *et al.*, 2002). It can be argued that even when lifespan research does cover cradle to grave, it remains heavily skewed to younger stages. Erik Erikson (1963) is credited with extending psychodynamic development to early, mid and late adulthood, and is arguably one of the most significant theorists when it comes to recognising psychological and anthropological perspectives on identity (Crain, 2005). He posits a theory encompassing eight stages of life and it is his seventh stage, associated with middle adulthood in particular, that is of most relevance in the context of lifelong learning research. This stage centres on conflicts of generativity versus stagnation. Generativity is defined as a concern (extending beyond close family) with the state of the world where future generations will live (Withnall, 2003). Stagnation occurs when the locus of concern focuses on the self rather than others. This notion of generativity versus stagnation emerges as a key theme in this empirical study and is explored in more depth in chapter 5/6.

Withnall (2003) and Slater (2003) argue that generativity can be relevant in the context of lifelong learning engagement, although Erikson (1963) was not as interested in education applications *per se*. Erikson's work has been criticised from a number of perspectives; in particular for conceptual vagueness (Crain, 2005), for a lack of rigorous methodology and a selective use of anthropological observation mixed with history, biography and psychoanalysis. Despite such criticisms, his framework offers a useful model because of its focus on maturation and the resolution of conflict, in addition to the impact of social demands on personal growth (Tennant, 2006).

Carl Jung is another key lifespan theorist, postulating the shaping of personality in the first stage of life (until the age of 35 or 40) leading into the second stage (Crain, 2005). Jung argues that at around the age of 40 the individual can go through a mid-

life crisis characterised by looking inwardly for meaning, at times feeling unbalanced and stagnant (Crain, 2005). In spite of criticisms of Jung's suggestion that this might be a universal process, alongside a tendency towards mysticism and spirituality, Crain (2005) argues that a number of significant pieces of empirical work offer support for his theories. As just one example, the work of Levinson (1978) reportedly examined his own findings in a Jungian context noting that individuals' lives fluctuate between periods of stability and transition. Levinson pays particular attention to reappraisal in mid-life and examines 'crises' across the lifespan. Four overlapping 'seasons' in the adult lifecycle are punctuated by transitions associated with age-related events such as retirement. This link with the lifespan and crises offers considerable insight when examining catalysts and triggers in section 3.6. There is also potential merit in reflecting on how education can both resolve and cause these crises, rather like a double-edged sword.

Extensive work has been undertaken in these areas and many of the findings are varied. Some theorists advocate the notion of maturation while others feel more compelled to argue for the influence of environment (Walters, 2000). Others emphasise stages or an optimistic versus a pessimistic outlook, depending on how conflicts are resolved. This is a complex field with little unanimity. When linking developmental psychology and adult education, Tennant (1990) argues that simply comparing educational activity and normative life cycle stages is overly simplistic, ignoring the individuality of development and not acknowledging the interrelationship between education and development. Stage theory and maturation offer a relatively inflexible and fixed developmental route for learning. Blair *et al.* (1995) concur in their review of participation research associated with life transitions, concluding that the application of 'life schedules' (in their words) implies too much linearity and offers insufficient insight into why adults engage with education to overcome challenges associated with life stages. This view echoes the findings of McNair (2009) and Bloomer and Hodkinson (2000) (which is explicated in section 3.4) and others about the growing unpredictability of the life course. Despite such critique, Swain and Hammond (2011) cite the more work of Feinstein *et al.* (2007) who identify different participation motivations for learners based on their current life stages, demonstrating favour still remains for this approach.

Building on the rejection of a simply stage-based approach based on ages and phases, Tennant (1990, p. 229) conceptualises development as an “ongoing dialectical process”. Drawing on the work of Riegel (1976), Buss (1979), Wozniak (1975) and Basseches (1984), this notion centres on the interrelationship between the person and society. A key component then is the interaction between the individual and their world, in which they develop, and are developed by the society in which they operate. It is this interaction, from the perspective of the learner, that forms an important focus for this investigation. Hendry and Kloep (2002) offer an updated approach to transition in development. Their work builds on Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) interest in the impact of the total social environment on an individual’s development and Elder’s (1998) interest in challenges shaping individual development.

Hendry and Kloep (2002) have devised what they term a lifespan model of developmental challenge that has its origins in some of this key theoretical work mentioned. They posit that individuals have their own resource ‘pool’ to draw on, including biological dispositions, social resources, skills in various domains, self-efficacy and structural resources (defined as material resources, nationality, race, personal or public status and social class). There is then a dynamic interaction between an individual’s potential resource pool and tasks that the individual must face. At an optimum level, development results when an individual responds effectively to a challenge through using this pool.

In 2009, Kloep *et al.* published a set of triggers for developmental change which included the categories of economy; education; health; relationships; locality; others’ needs; leisure; work; and values (appendix B). They argue that development is not purely maturational but that humans grow when they meet and overcome challenges associated with environmental impact. What prompts development and transition is at the heart of this enquiry into catalysts and triggers.

3.4 The learning career

In exploring young people’s decision-making in relation to learning and career opportunities, Hodkinson (2008) and colleagues warn against over-emphasising individual agency and structural forces. Their work is rooted in two concepts they

have devised and refined: careership (Hodkinson *et al.*, 1996; Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997) – a sociological theory of career decision-making - and learning careers - which, “refers to the development of dispositions to learning over time” (Bloomer and Hodkinson, 2000, p. 590). Hodkinson (2008, p. 1) summarises the developments of this work in ten what they term “inter-related aspects of educational and career development”. Key aspects include (Hodkinson, 2008, p. 12):

- Positioning in terms of gender, geography etc
- Developing orientations to education, work and career through biography
- Acquiring cultural, social and economic capital based upon our evolving positions
- Possessing ‘horizons’ for action which influence how people make sense of their lives and opportunities and pragmatically construct their own ‘studentship’
- Pragmatically rational decisions are made within horizons
- Progression and learning are strongly influenced by decisions, choices and/or actions of others
- Learning career choice and progression are strongly influenced by serendipity
- Progression can be seen as a sequence of routines and turning points, of varying types
- Young people face obstacles or barriers and they can be overcome to varying degrees by position, disposition, capital and self-confidence

Hodkinson and colleagues conclude that career decisions and progression are always positioned within social structures (such as ethnicity and gender) and within the field the person is operating in. This position contrasts with social learning theory (see for example Krumboltz, 1979) which views learning as cognitive, individual and disembodied as opposed to social and embodied. Building on the idea of positions, Reay *et al.* (2001) and Ball *et al.* (2000) recognise the impact of geography and highlight the importance of historical context across the lifespan. This research emphasises the elements of subjectivity and the central role of interaction. Hodkinson (2008), Reay *et al.* (2001) and Ball *et al.* (2000) argue that career decisions are rarely single events and instead as a minimum there is a lead up to a decision and there are

implications of the change after the decision has been made. In light of this there is merit in reflecting critically on how careers support, especially for young people, is provided. Hodkinson (2008, p. 11) suggests, “Our on-going actions, reactions and interactions influence who we are, our positions, dispositions and identities”. Much of the work on the learning career is rooted in symbolic interactionist theory (Crossan *et al.*, 2003). Further influences include the Chicago School’s use of the term ‘career’ as an analytical vehicle for examining the trajectories of young people, the work of Lave and Wenger (1991) on situated learning and the terminology of ‘dispositions’ developed by Pierre Bourdieu (Crossan *et al.*, 2003).

In summarising the work of Bloomer and Hodkinson (2000), Crossan *et al.* (2003, p. 57) propose that a learning career is “transformed through the challenges presented by the sudden changes and growth in life passages that are characteristic of adolescence”. In the source words of Bloomer and Hodkinson (2000, p. 590), a learning career is:

A career of events, activities and meanings, and the making and remaking of meanings through these activities and events, and it is a career of relationships and the constant making and remaking of relationships, including relationships between position and disposition.

Essentially Bloomer and Hodkinson (2000) perceive that the learning career can be transformed by experiences of differing social interactions, circumstances and events, much of which is common during adolescence. Swain and Hammond (2011) cite the work of Bloomer and Hodkinson (2000) and Crossan *et al.* (2003) in emphasising that learning careers are seldom linear. Crossan *et al.* (2003) observe that Bloomer and Hodkinson (2000) do not extend their work to incorporate adult learning careers and offer a number of critiques. Firstly they propose perceived definitional inconsistencies as the work of Bloomer and colleagues focuses primarily on formal learning which places it at odds with Lave and Wenger’s (1991) underpinning work that incorporates aspects of informal learning and other learning outside the formal context. Secondly Crossan *et al.* (2003) are critical of what they determine as Bloomer and Hodkinson’s (2000, p. 595) over-reliance on agency over structure, a focus “upon individual cases” as opposed to “categories of young people”. Swain and Hammond (2011, p. 593) draw on Giddens (1979, 1998) and reiterate their position that individuals operate

within “wider structures that include social, cultural, political and economic contexts” and these have the potential to both constrain and foster behaviour. Swain and Hammond’s (2011) interpretation of the intersection of these different enabling and constraining forces is depicted in figure 2.

Crossan *et al.* (2003) seek to explore the learning careers of adults encapsulated within these contexts and they offer a well-considered definition of ‘adult’. In extending the work of Bloomer and Hodkinson, Crossan *et al.* (2003, p. 58) seek:

A model of learning careers that acknowledges the objective socio-economic positions in which actors are located. For [them], the concept of learning career is used to shed light on the complex interplay between the social and economic structures which shape people’s lives, the educational institutions which determine the processes of engagement with learning, and the learners themselves.

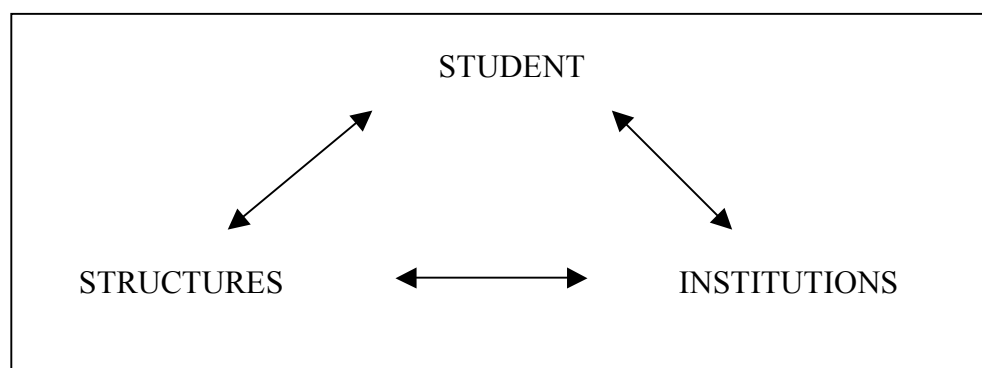


Figure 2. The intersection of students, structures and the institution that affects learning from Swain and Hammond (2011, p. 594).

Of particular relevance to this thesis, Crossan *et al.* (2003) refer to certain life events of their sample learners as having triggered initial steps to learning, employing the terminology used in this research. Their work accurately concludes that learning careers for adult can be volatile, multidirectional and associated with fragile learning identities. However, while their findings make reference to their own model of learning careers, they do not actually offer a ‘model’ beyond providing a detailed explication of two discrete narratives of learner histories. Their commentary is built around two narratives, and while these are compelling and the authors correctly acknowledge the caveat that this does not (and cannot) yield a formal typology, it still

does not tell us enough. The work of Crossan *et al.* (2003) in conjunction with the work of Bloomer and Hodkinson (2000) is nevertheless still highly relevant in offering insight into the context of developing an understanding of the catalysts and triggers that influence engagement in lifelong learning amongst adult learners undertaking access courses in the South Wales Valleys. This work also highlights the need for careers support in adulthood by inviting us to look at structures, institutions and the individual.

A further relevant aspect of Hodkinson and colleague's studies pertains to their conclusions on routines and turning points in the career. Their findings were inspired by an examination of career development literature that articulates broadly linear career development (Hodkinson, 2008). This did not resonate with their sample, even though they were followed for a period of only 18 months. Hodkinson (2008) draws on metaphors for the career originally proposed by Strauss (1962): the comparison of the career to a ladder emphasising the linear development and the metaphor of an egg in which it can be boiled or poached but ultimately it remains an egg. Despite his more rigid focus on linearity and fixed notion of a career, Strauss (1962) did write about turning points and it is these that Hodkinson (2008) found in the work he undertook with colleagues.

Hodkinson (2008) employs the language of turning points, routine and epiphanies and reflects that they are very difficult to classify, especially in the context of a long career. Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997, p. 39) acknowledge that other life course studies have identified similar conceptions of turning points including Denzin's (1989) articulation of 'epiphanies', Antikainen *et al.*'s (1996) discussion of life-changing events and Alheit's (1994) work on 'biographical discontinuity'. A further example includes Maslow's (1959) work on peak experiences. All of this work adopts a similar central idea, that a significant identity transformation occurs at these turning-points. Careership is then conceptualised as "an uneven pattern of routine experience interspersed with such turning-points" and that "within each turning-point, career decisions are pragmatically rational and embedded in the complex struggles and negotiations of the field" (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997, p 39).

While Alheit (1994) and Antikainen *et al.* (1996) do not seek to categorise the types of turning-points, Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) argue that turning points can be categorised as structural (determined by external structures of the institutions involved), forced (driven by external events and/or the actions of other such as redundancy) or self-initiated (the person involved precipitates a transformation, in response to different forces in personal life within the field) (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997, p. 39). They argue that some turning-points can be foreseen and prepared for while others can only be identified in hindsight. It is this lack of predictability that undermines the utility of trajectory models in career development. In relation to turning points, Denzin (1989) creates a typology of four categories, the first being a major event, which impacts a person's entire life. The second form is termed a cumulative or representative event, associated with an eruption or response to something that may have been occurring for some period of time. The third type is classed as a minor epiphany, representing a significant moment in a life or relationship. The fourth form of epiphany relates to the association of meaning with reliving an experience.

Extending the exploration of turning-points, Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997, p. 40) argue that the work of Antikainen *et al.* (1996), Denzin (1989), Strauss (1962) and others focuses mainly on the actual epiphanies themselves rather than the periods of routine they are interspersed with. They propose this is an oversight in their critique, as turning-points are inextricably linked with the routines evident both before and after the event. Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997, p. 40) have sought to categorise these routines and have developed five classifications: confirmatory (reinforcing a decision already made thereby contributing to the sense of identity and blurring a distinction between routine and turning point), contradictory (a routine undermining the original decision leading to dissatisfaction), socialising (confirming an identity not originally desired), dislocating (in which a person lives with an identity they do not like), and evolutionary (applied when a person changes gradually and outgrows their identity). The conceptualisation of turning-points and routines as offered by Hodkinson and colleagues holds much interest for an investigation of adult participation in education and ensuing identity transformation.

While reflecting on their work with adolescents and their learning transformations, Bloomer and Hodkinson (2000, p. 594) propose it would be interesting to explore whether adults, returning to formal education following absence and engaging with new interaction opportunities, experience learning career transformation on the same scale as the younger learners in their study. While Crossan *et al.* (2003) have considered Bloomer and Hodkinson's work in an adult context and this research does not seek to analyse the scale of transformations of older learners in comparison with younger learners, nevertheless an exploration of such a transformation forms an associated component of the focus of this study.

3.5 Learner trajectories

A further dimension in participation research is associated with the idea of learner trajectories. While careers research takes an interest in choice and decision-making and considers the flexible path a learner may take, trajectory research makes assumptions about more fixed paths in a similar fashion to a missile following a course after launch.

Rees *et al.* (2000) argue that despite the current thrust in lifelong learning policy and rhetoric that adults participate in education to derive economic benefit which should in turn render the examination of participation a relatively straightforward matter, the behaviour of individuals is integrally linked to social relations which are influenced by interpersonal relationships, social norms, community and family structures and more besides. They argue that while the "temporal and spatial variations in empirical patterns of participation" have been widely explored, the implications of such an analysis have been considered in less depth (2000, p. 174). Rees and colleagues argue that in order to conduct a full analysis of participation, consideration must be given to the structure of learning opportunities as well as constraints to accessing such opportunities driven by social and cultural resources associated with different groups. Supplementary to this, Fevre *et al.* (1999) argue that beyond the interplay between participation and structural conditions, awareness of learning opportunities and belief and attitudes towards them also play a key role in influencing participation. The researchers propose that the 'learner identities' – constituted of belief and attitudes –

vary temporally, economically and spatially. This then demonstrates the complexity of individual, family, community and wider determinants (Rees *et al.*, 1997a).

It is an understanding of the determinants of participation that constitutes much of the attention of the work undertaken by Rees *et al.* Their work focuses specifically on the region of industrial South Wales to examine patterns of lifelong learning participation in conjunction with changes in economic structure and resulting social shifts. They deploy the concept of ‘trajectory’ in order to examine empirical patterns of lifelong learning participation. Their work seeks to aggregate individual experience of learning participation across the life-course in order to compile typologies of participants. They argue that the ‘trajectory’ individuals join is heavily influenced by resources associated with their social background and that in order to achieve a detailed analysis, it is prescient to consider the intersection between the individual ‘learner identity’ and wider structural forces. The notion of ‘learner identity’ has much relevance for later findings within this thesis in the context of learner reengagement experiences.

Their work initially identified eleven categories which they distilled to constitute five distinct trajectories: immature (consisting of respondents who were still in full-time compulsory education); non-participant (no evidence of participation in education following compulsory schooling, no participation in continuing education as adults, no involvement in government training schemes coupled with no significant work-based training); transitional learners (who engaged in work-based training only immediately after finishing compulsory schooling); delayed trajectory (learners who did not participate in education between compulsory schooling and the age of 21 but then engaged in at least one substantive occurrence of education or training subsequently); and, lifelong learners (reporting transitional participation and subsequent episodes of education and training, even if of a varied nature) (Rees *et al.*, 2000). Those on the so-called delayed trajectory and the lifelong learners constitute the focus in this study, given the level of engagement required to warrant access participation.

Their work looks historically at participation statistics and finds evidence of participation congruent with the period such as work-based education within the

coalfields and the rise of workers education. Rees *et al.* (2000) consider gender as a factor and identify different patterns emerging, namely that the increased participation of men in post-school education arose a decade before a similar rise with female learners and that for men, an increase in participation is linked more strongly to the lifelong learning trajectory whereas women's increased participation is more linked to transitional learning. In order to investigate the characteristics that they tentatively term 'social determinants of patterns of participation', Rees *et al.* (2000) distil 40 variables to five factors including: time (specifically when respondents were born); place (where respondents were born and brought up); gender (as men continually reported more formal learning than their female counterparts); family (parents' social class, educational experience and family religion are argued to be the most significant determinants of lifelong learning participation); and, initial schooling (as it plays a key role in forming longer-term learning orientations and providing access to subsequent learning opportunities due to qualifications gained).

Rees *et al.* (2000) argue that implications are profound for predicting lifelong learning trajectories and the key utility of these factors is that they are established early on in life, by the time an individual is of school-leaving age. When discussing how a trajectory can be actively predicted they argue that "this does not imply, of course, that people do not have choices, or that life crises have little impact, but rather that, to a large extent, these choices occur within a framework of opportunities, influences and social expectations that are determined independently" (Rees *et al.*, 2000, p. 182). Rees *et al.* (2000) cite Gorard *et al.* (1998) in arguing that when more detailed modelling is conducted, it emerges that it is easier to predict participation immediately after compulsory schooling. Later participation, while influenced by many of the same variables, can however be more nuanced. For example, it is reported that those leaving school with no qualifications are more likely to return to learning later in life than those who do not achieve what the authors term the benchmark equivalent of five GCSEs, although the inverse is true in the context of transitional learning. Rees *et al.* (2000, pp. 182-183) purport "many of the determinants of later participation are different and reflect the changing circumstances of adult life in terms of family relationships, access to learning opportunities through employment and so on".

3.6 Crises across the lifespan

Rees *et al.* (2000) argue that there is no simple pattern of participation among the individual accounts and that this is true even for those who pursue the same trajectory.

Rees *et al.* (2000, p. 9) write that:

Certainly, it is clear that, to make sense of individuals' learning histories, it is necessary to understand the ways in which learning opportunities were understood when decisions over participation were being made. Moreover, there is strong evidence that these 'social constructions' of opportunities, in turn, are shaped by a range of contextual influences.

It is these unique 'contextual influences' that form part of the landscape of interest for the present research and this research is interested in examining the individual crises in more depth.

Mezirow (1981, 1997) has written on the concept of transformative learning over several decades and his work argues that everybody constructs a reality seeking validation from the socio-cultural world and at times disharmony can be found in this experience. When this lack of harmony, or 'disjunction' occurs, individuals are forced to reassess their situations. Mezirow, along with Aslanian and Brickell (1980), identify life crises for such disjunction and it is at these points that a return to learning is often found (Jarvis, 2004). This holds much potential for the investigation of catalysts and, to use the terminology of Hendry and Kloep (2002), triggers for developmental change. Furthermore, Levinson's work (cited in Crain, 2005) notes fluctuations in the lives of individuals' between periods of stability and transition. Levinson pays particular attention to reappraisal in mid-life and examines crises across the lifespan. This link with lifespan and crisis proves insightful when considering forces and experiences impacting on engagement in adult education.

Gould (1978) adopts a dynamic view of adulthood in which events such as having a baby and losing a parent force individuals to see themselves as creators of their own lives and in control of their destinies. Sheehy (1976, 1996) has authored two texts on moments of predictable crisis in adult life and purports that times of crisis – despite

painful experiences - can act as an opportunity for growth. Her work highlights the importance of internal changes arguing:

A developmental stage, however, is not defined in terms of marker events; it is defined by the changes that begin within. The underlying impulse toward change will be there regardless of whether or not it is manifested in or accentuated by a marker event... The inner realm is where the crucial shifts in bed-rock begin to throw a person off balance, signalling the necessity to change and move on to a new footing in the next stage of development. (1976, pp. 29-30).

In relation to Sheehy's work, Field (2006) argues that looking at age and life stage has reportedly lost its' appeal as modern lives become so diverse and unpredictable. In response to Sheehy's reference to the inner realm, Walters (2000) cites the work of Neugarten (1968) who instead advocates patterns imposed by societal norms. According to Neugarten (1968, p. 142) there is a "prescriptive timetable for the ordering of life events". This implies, for example, that individuals are expected to study, marry and retire according to a socially prescribed timetable. Mature students, as inherent in the word 'mature', are not conforming to such norms (Walters, 2000). When considering readiness to learn, Walters (2000) cites the work of Knox (1977) who proposes:

When a change event occurs, the need for some adaptation produces, for some adults at least, a heightened readiness to engage in educative activity. The resulting educative activity may be directly or indirectly related to the change event, and the relation may or may not be recognised by the individual. This period of heightened readiness had been referred to as a teachable moment. (p.539).

In terms of events and transitions there is debate as to whether these may have a "precipitating rather than a causative effect on change and resulting action" (Walters, 2000, p. 271). To illustrate this, Walters draws on the work of Aslanian and Brickell (1980) in which 83% of their respondents cite a change in their life as their reason for learning.

Synthesising the work of a number of theorists, and drawing specifically on the work of Aslanian and Brickell (1980), Walters (2000) develops a framework consisting of three Rs (redundancy, recognition and regeneration) to examine mature students'

motivations, expectations and outcomes of higher education study. In terms of redundancy, this can signify redundancy of frame of reference, of meaning perspective, of self-concept, of role (relationships/employment) and/or of skills (Walters, 2000). Walters (2000, p. 272) defines redundancy in the concept of the model as:

...part of maturation. [Walter's sees] it as a positive and dynamic process through which one is continually restructuring the reality of the past by reinterpreting it as one moves from one perspective to the next. Having moved on, the old perspective is redundant.

When theorising about redundancy, Walters (2000) draws on the work of Mezirow (1978) who argues that life dilemmas can bring about such perspective transformation and Aslanian and Brickell (1980) who articulate these life events or dilemmas as triggers for learning. Walters (2000) argues that alienation from familiar social roles may result in existential questions of 'who am I?' and cites examples of divorce and retirement. It is this redundancy of one's role and skills that can trigger a return to learning. Walters draws on the work of Blair *et al.* (1995) in proposing that responses to such events can be both positive and proactive as well as negative and reactive. In terms of redundancy of self-concept, Walters cites the example of an adult returning to learning to shed stigma from school where they were perceived as an academic failure, a theme that will be revisited in chapters 5/6.

The second R in Walter's framework, Recognition, relates to recognition of the need for change, of actual change, of role model, of new perspectives, of new direction/choice, of relevance of learning, of readiness to learn and/or of prior learning. Walters (2000, p. 273) argues that:

Progression is dependent on recognition of redundancy and/or change. This latter could be recognition of the possibility of effecting change, the desirability of change, or the reality of change: that is, accepting that change has already occurred in one's role, self-concept, frame of reference or meaning perspective.

In essence recognition is necessary to fuel the motivation to participate in education. Walters (2000) borrows the term recognition from Houle (1961) but acknowledges

that Houle prioritises the internal process within the individual, as does Mezirow (1978) in his discussion of perspective taking.

To articulate the power of regeneration as the third component of her framework, Walters (2000) draws on the work of Dominice (1990, p. 206):

As they trace their education throughout their lives, people reveal that they often enter adult education classes to repair, compensate for or fill in the gaps in their past. They dream about the university because earlier in their lives they did not have the chance to study. They embark upon personal development because they hope to recover from old wounds of the past. They decide to update their work skills in order to move ahead.

Dominice (1990) champions the use of narrative to explore life history, self-concept and/or self-esteem, a methodology of particular interest in the context of this study.

Writing on reflexivity and lifelong learning, Edwards *et al.* (2002) argue that individuals are experiencing greater disruptions in their lives through self-made agent forces (with a high locus of control) and central societal force (often associated with external control). They argue that this disruption creates a pressing need to find solutions and gain more autonomy. One response is to explore ways of fostering a culture of lifelong learning, one that embraces reflexivity as part of the learning process and not solely a reactive one (Edwards *et al.*, 2002). Schratz (1996) undertook a relatively small-scale study with 30 participants across three European countries exploring the power of biographical learning. Schratz (1996) acknowledges that crises in the life course impact upon identity formation, and that benefits are associated with teaching and learning that enable learners to reflect on their learning biographies. Both sets of commentators advocate the power of reflection, which acknowledges the discontinuity within individuals' lives as central in articulating further insight into the causes for adult learner engagement. In the context of this research, the impact of disruption and discontinuity has the potential to resonate strongly with the experiences of adult learners.

The construction of learner identities and experiences

Wojecki (2007), although writing about the context of adult learning in the workplace, effectively highlights that the ways in which learners identify with and articulate their experience of formal learning impact upon their potential engagement with formal learning in the future. Although it could be argued this is a statement of the obvious, there is scope to reflect on the significance of this observation. When lifelong learning is such a pivotal concern in the context of developing economic prosperity and harnessing potential individual emancipation, there is merit in deconstructing the learning identities of adult learners. Wojecki (2007, p. 179) argues “the stories learners tell and retell about their experiences of learning therefore should be at the forefront of adult educators’ work” and that these stories “are more than just stories – they articulate the embodied self-descriptions of how learners understand and express the possibilities or limitations of their participation in formal learning contexts, the lifeplace, and workplace”. Wojecki (2007) discusses the metaphor of prior ‘wounding learning practices’ and the impact these can have on adult learner engagement in future formal learning following their articulation. Antikainen (1998, p. 218) employs the term ‘significant learning experience’ defined as “those which appeared to guide the interviewee’s life-course, or to have changed or strengthened his or her identity”. Antikainen (1998) argues that an individual’s life story can be structured around the significant learning experiences and that these in turn represent turning points in individuals’ learning biographies. In exploring significant learning experiences Antikainen (1998) identified personal and social relations associated with the learning experience and employed symbolic interactionist language to identify significant others of learning. Both concepts offer relevance in the context of crises in the life span and the impact of critical incidents and they hold topical methodological significance for this work.

A number of studies have highlighted the underpinning motives for adults to engage with educational opportunities, while others have explored barriers as well as participation patterns. What is not so apparent is the detailed evidence of influences and experiences that act as catalysts and triggers in adult education engagement and crucially their interaction and the meaning learners assign to them. Given the potential power and scope of lifelong learning, this can be argued to constitute a notable

omission in existing literature and one warranting further exploration. As argued by Withnall (2006), Antikainen (1998) and Alheit (1992), it is imperative to consider individual biography and societal forces and this can be argued to invite the multidisciplinary focus adopted within this research.

3.7 Chapter summary and link to chapter 4

As evidenced in sections 3.2 to 3.6, there exists an extensive, albeit in places quite disparate, body of research into adult participation in education. This extends from Houle's (1961) typology to Boeren *et al.*'s (2010) model on the structural forces impacting engagement at the micro, meso and macro level. The wider body includes literature on lifespan development theory and considers stage-based maturational theories and transitions faced by adults across their life course, with particular reference to the work of Hendry and Kloep (2002). The concepts of crises, turning points and epiphanies interspersed with routine yielding a return to learning and/or a change of career also emerges. Additionally research into determinants of participation resulting into the classification of learner trajectories exists. Much of this is somewhat peripheral to what is here-termed catalyst and triggers research in the context of learners' individual trajectories.

As evident in table 1, there exist a number of categorisations of adult participation motives. Putting aside Ahl's (2006) extensive critique of motivation itself, these lists and groupings do not provide a full picture of reengagement. Several models have been devised through recent research to depict the components of engagement including figure 1 drawn from Blair *et al.* (1995) and figure 2 developed by Swain and Hammond (2011). As outlined in chapter 1, catalysts and triggers are conceptualised in this study as the influences and circumstances that prompt participation and shape learner identities and learning journeys. Catalysts are considered as a range of personal and environmental circumstances and these can include direct personal influences such as employment and family, influences at the local community level and more widely in the context of the current economic climate. This categorisation resonates with the supply and demand conditions conceptualised by Blair *et al.* (1995). Additionally a trigger is envisaged to represent a particular experience that has prompted engagement with adult education and can

include turning points, crises or reactive goals in response to life events as qualified by Blair *et al.* (1995) among others. This work seeks to devise a conceptualisation that depicts a greater level of interaction than the work of Blair *et al.* (1995), more similar to the work of Crossan *et al.* (2003). Crossan *et al.*'s work nevertheless demands additional focus on formal adult learning even though it builds on the work of Hodgkinson and colleagues. In the context of this research, a catalyst is perceived as representative of situational factors and based around the layout of the individual learner's landscape that can respond to stimulus. A trigger (or triggers) then constitute(s) the stimuli that interact with the circumstantial catalysts to precipitate the change in situation. Such triggers can range from chance interactions with course tutors or friends to significant life events, encapsulating for example the serendipity referenced by Hodgkinson and colleagues.

An overview of the aforementioned literature highlights a number of potential influences including school experience, family and a powerful connection with employment. As Antikainen (1998) and Alheit (1994) purport, both structural frameworks and personal dispositions play a role in reengagement. Furthermore, the identification of crises is relevant in the context of some triggers but drawing on Blair *et al.* and Walters (2000), more than a stage-based approach is required. When analysed, the literature in chapters 2 and 3 offer varied insight into catalysts and triggers, but the evidence does not seem to sufficiently address 'the in-between' nor does it encapsulate the unique perspectives of South Wales or access courses.

In relation to catalysts and triggers, the concept of turning-points and epiphanies considered by Hodgkinson and Sparkes (1997) and others holds much potential appeal for articulating possible influences. The work conducted by Rees *et al.* (2000) with its focus on the region of South Wales that reflects the centre of this research is also highly relevant. Despite this work being very topical in this context, much of it remains quite disparate. Given the imperative of lifelong learning and the potential barriers to participation facing individuals, especially perhaps the delayed trajectory learner identified by Rees *et al.* (2000), there seems to be a pressing need to synthesise this. The exploration of catalysts and triggers proposes a holistic investigation that seeks to extend understanding from the perspective of the learner. As much of the existing research outlines, the impact of individual, family and

societal forces cannot be overlooked and the concept of catalysts and triggers seeks to take this wider picture into account while focusing on the individual learning journey.

In the context of this study, the interplay of these catalysts and triggers is visualised as follows in the proposed conceptual framework depicted as figure 3. This conceptual framework is designed to demonstrate diagrammatically the potential catalysts and triggers and their interaction from the perspective of the individual learner and the meaning they assign to them. In order to fulfil the aim of this research, which is to understand the catalysts and triggers that influence engagement in lifelong learning amongst adult learners undertaking access courses in the South Wales Valleys, and to facilitate the development of this conceptual framework, the following three research questions have been posed:

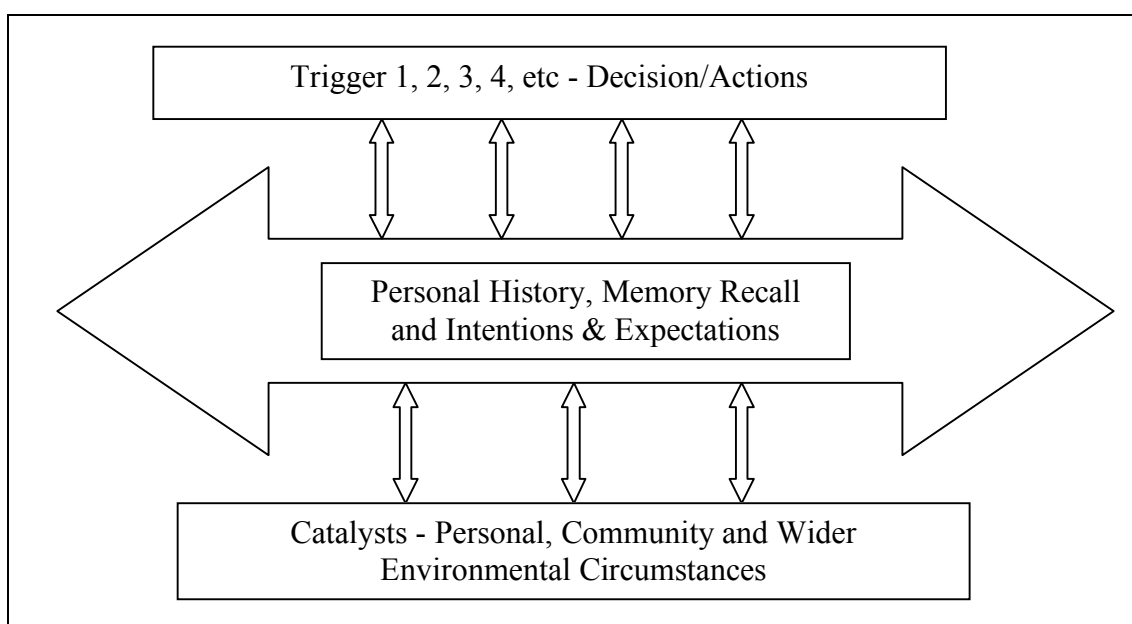


Figure 3. Catalysts and triggers in the context of learners' own personal trajectories – a conceptual framework

- 1) What personal and environmental circumstances act as a catalyst to influence adult learners' engagement in undertaking access courses in the South Wales Valleys?
- 2) How do events during the life experience of a learner trigger their decisions to undertake formal adult education in the context of access students in the South Wales Valleys?

3) What interplay of catalysts and triggers in the experience of these learners act to prompt their reengagement?

Investigating these questions through a grounded analysis is designed to offer insight into detailed aspects of reengagement and the key interest in this study is associated with the overall influence of the intersections on the horizontal bi-directional arrow as outlined in figure 3 resulting in current educational engagement and future aspirations articulated by individual learners. In view of the gap in the literature evident around the interaction between the different influences and forces on reengagement from the perspective of the learner themselves, this provides a key opportunity for further research and development of understanding that invites the application of the methodology outlined in chapter 4.

In terms of implications for access policy and practice this chapter has highlighted that adult education continues to be neglected in terms of both research and policy. There is evidence of more of a scattergun approach concerning adults than is evident with youth participation. Many existing studies into participation are superficial in nature and there is evidence that the most vulnerable groups are the least likely to participate which is a disturbing finding. Ahl (2006) writes on the complex interplay that results in participation and is highly critical of the notion of motivation and particularly of theory suggesting that the removal of barriers will result in participation. The challenge is not as simple as this, hence the need for studies such as this one delving further. There exists a need for greater insight and current models do not provide a complete overview of educational return. The work of Rees *et al.* (2000), although acknowledging individuals can be influenced by crises, primarily emphasises the power of determinants shaping life chances. This study incorporates an empirical focus on those who, according to their life determinants, have decided to participate independently in spite of their circumstances. Access represents a powerful vehicle for such learners. There is a need for more detailed understanding of influences and experiences that act as catalysts and triggers and their interaction and the meaning learners assign to them. The literature review presented in chapters 2 and 3 has not found sufficient evidence to explain the ‘in-between’ of participation, the particular context of the South Wales Valleys and the perspective of access courses, so valuable as a second chance for learners.

Chapter 4 – Methodology

4.1 Chapter overview

As identified in section 3.2, research such as that conducted by Findsen *et al.* (2011) employing a semi-structured interview method represents an ideal means to elicit rich illustrative data from research participants. The aim of this research is to develop an understanding of the catalysts and triggers that influence adult learners' engagement in lifelong learning in the context of adult learners undertaking access courses in the South Wales Valleys. The work draws on a wide range of literature including lifespan development theory and social psychology perspectives - thereby offering an interdisciplinary insight to inform the development of relevant findings. An exploration of such catalysts and triggers can be achieved by conducting in-depth, semi-structured interviews with students participating in formal learning, specifically access students in the case of this research and a detailed overview of this method and the associated methodology is presented in this chapter. This chapter outlines the methodological underpinnings commencing with a discussion of the epistemological and ontological positions. This is coupled with an overview of alternative and, in some cases, opposing perspectives adopted in social science research and the benefits and drawbacks of an interpretivist approach is discussed in relation to research in adult education. Following a discussion of the specific approach adopted in considering the research questions, an exploration of the life history method follows and this is integrally linked with the importance of researcher reflexivity. An overview of the methods employed in developing this research project is presented at section 4.5 in the context of potential alternative methods used by qualitative researchers in adult education. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the data analysis techniques used, with particular reference to grounded theory, the outcomes of which are examined in detail in chapters 5 and 6.

4.2 Interpretivist stance

Guba (1990) argues that no researcher can afford to be a stranger to any paradigm - a perspective that encompasses ontology, epistemology and method. Ontology is concerned with questions of what constitutes reality or the study of being (Crotty,

2004) and how these can be classified and whether something is “real” or “illusory” in the context of social and natural reality (Johnson and Duberley, 2005, p. 67). Accordingly there exists a bifurcation point between realist ontology and subjectivist ontology. Although conceptions and definitions abound, Johnson and Duberley (2005, p. 67) propose an explanation that realist ontology “assumes that social and natural reality exist independently of our cognitive structures”. Subjectivist ontology in turn “assumes that what we take to be external social and natural reality is merely a creation of our consciousness and cognitions” (2005, p. 67). The notion of subjectivity permeates this research as the ensuing discussion of epistemology explores.

Crotty (2004) argues that theoretical perspectives – his preferred term for ontology - relate to seeing the world and in turn, making sense of it. Whether employing the terminology of ontology or theoretical perspective, these issues are argued to merge with epistemological questions as definition of what exists influences the knowledge base that is then theorised (Crotty, 2004). Epistemology is associated with theory of knowledge (Guba, 1990; Willig, 2008) and issues of what constitutes knowledge within a discipline (Bryman, 2008). There exist a number of epistemologies, some in strong opposition with one another and others conceptualised in only subtly different ways. These can include, for example: objectivism – separating reality from consciousness; subjectivism – where meaning is created by the subject without specific interplay with the object; and, constructionism – generating meaning through interaction between the subject and object (Crotty, 2004).

An objectivist epistemology, which separates reality from consciousness, is closely aligned with a positivist approach (Bryman, 2008). Characteristics of positivism include the seeking of objective knowledge, a reliance on quantitative data, a separation of fact from value and the development of universal laws (Robson, 2005). The positivist/objective stance entails the control of variables, dominated by experimental design and laboratory data. The knowledge derived from such research cannot be generalised confidently to humans, who are classified by some as symbolic operators, and this has significant implications for social research more widely and certainly in the context of adult education research. Conceptualised another way, positivism can be articulated as “the non-critical acceptance of scientific method as

the only way to arrive at true knowledge” (Hogg and Vaughan, 2008, p. 24). The research philosophy underpinning this study eschews a positivist epistemological paradigm as it would be inappropriate to enforce the use of natural science methods on the study of highly personal learning engagement influences (Bryman, 2008). Positivism demands the generation of hypotheses, the rigorous control of variables, the development of laws and the production of facts, none of which align with the purpose of this study which instead aims to offer rich understanding of complex influences as they pertain to learner biographies (Bryman, 2008). Biography represents a useful vehicle to explore personal learner trajectories not in the context of existing trajectory work designed to predict participation on the basis of sociological elements such as social class and gender, but instead when conceptualised as an individual learner journey. Only by examining the detail of individual learner journeys is it possible to explore the why and the how behind adult entry, re-entry and reengagement where more traditional ‘trajectory’ research offers limited insight.

A further epistemology, subjectivism, emerges from structuralist, post-structuralist and postmodernist thinking (Johnson and Duberley, 2005). The key tenet is the interplay between object and subject where the subject enforces meaning on the object. Although the meaning applied by the subject comes from somewhere, it expressly does not come from the object in this epistemological context (Johnson and Duberley, 2005). Confusion can occur between subjectivism and constructionism (Crotty, 2004) although there are clear distinctions between them. Constructionist epistemology sees meaning emerging from interactions within the realities of our world and represents an oft-cited methodology in qualitative research as a central perspective (Crotty, 2004).

Burrell and Morgan (1979), working in the area of organisation studies, propose the existence of four paradigms, the two main ones being the functionalist paradigm (aligned with a positivist approach) and the interpretivist paradigm (which seeks understanding from the perspective of participants). Although Burrell and Morgan appear quite rigid in their classification of paradigms, an approach somewhat at odds with the notion of fluidity in the research process, the interpretivist paradigm is of particular relevance in the context of this research study.

The theoretical perspective of interpretivism is argued to “[look] for culturally derived and historically situated interpretations of the social life-world” (Crotty, 2004, p. 67). Both interpretivist and constructivist accounts share similar philosophical approaches and in discussing their impact on research outlook, Schwandt asserts that:

Proponents of these persuasions share the goal of understanding the complex world of lived experience from the point of view of those who live it. This goal is variously spoken of as an abiding concern for the life world, for the emic point of view, for understanding meaning, for grasping the actor’s definition of a situation, for Verstehen. The world of lived reality and situation-specific meanings that constitute the general object of investigation is thought to be constructed by social actors. (1994, p. 118).

A key emphasis in this approach is the focus on the perspective of those that live the experience, the social actors. It should be noted that the terms constructivism, naturalistic and interpretivist are sometimes used interchangeably within research methodology literature (Robson, 2005; Guba and Lincoln, 1994), not always sufficiently acknowledging the subtleties between them. For the purpose of this study, the term interpretivism is used as it most closely aligns with the aims of the research and is integrally linked with the notion of interpretive interactionism, explored in section 4.3.

An important element distinguishing the interpretivist paradigm highlights the difference between natural sciences and the social world and specifically, the varying logic required to understand human behaviour (Heracleous, 2006; Bryman, 2008). By its very nature this study situates itself within a broadly interpretivist paradigm which requires grasping “the subjective meaning of social action” (Bryman, 2008: 16) of direct relevance in this research aiming to develop insight into catalysts and triggers by exploring learner biographies and individual trajectories from the learner perspective. Origins of interpretivism are rooted in the German intellectual thinking of Max Weber (1864-1920) and Alfred Schutze (1899-1959) (Blaikie, 2004; Bryman, 2008).

In the interpretivist paradigm a distinction is made between explaining and understanding human behaviour and this links to Weber’s work on Verstehen,

translated to mean understanding, in the specific context of interpretive understanding of social action (Bryman, 2008). The focus of Weber and Schutze's work addresses "the nature of meaningful social action, its role in understanding patterns in social life, and how this meaning can be assessed" (Blaikie, 2004, p. 509). Interpretivist roots are deemed to stem from the traditions of both hermeneutics and phenomenology (Blaikie, 2004).

The term hermeneutics emerges from theology and when translated for use in the social sciences is associated with the theory and method of interpreting human action (Bryman, 2008). Although originally associated with extracting meaning from sacred texts, it is now seen as synonymous with the search for deeper meaning elsewhere (Gabriel, 2008). A number of hermeneutic approaches exist including literary criticism, discourse analysis and deconstruction (Gabriel, 2008). There are inevitable links to phenomenology as a philosophy exploring how individuals attribute meaning to the world around them (Blaikie, 2004; Bryman, 2008).

Interpretivism is not without its critics, some associated with a perceived failure to consider institutional structures and others judgemental of the focus on the actor's account of their actions (Rex, 1974; Giddens, 1984; Blaikie, 2004). Nevertheless, despite these criticisms, it can be argued that interpretivism represents a powerful orthodoxy in contrast with more objectivist epistemologies. Although the hermeneutic-phenomenological traditions have influenced the interpretivist paradigm intellectually, symbolic interaction represents an additional key influence with implications for empirical research (Bryman, 2008) and develops the theme of the social actor. Symbolic interactionism has its own epistemological consequences, many of which are highly relevant to this investigation, as the following section considers.

4.3 Symbolic interactionism and interpretive interactionism

Symbolic interactionism has arisen, like a number of other epistemologies, as a reaction to more objectivist paradigms (Heracleous, 2006) and is seen as a major humanistic research tradition (Plummer, 2004). George Herbert Mead is credited with laying the foundations of the concept of symbolic interactionism (Charon, 2010;

Heracleous, 2006; Plummer, 2004), and there are links with Mead's work on the self as well as to postmodernism (Giddens, 2009). For Mead the self exists in relation to other selves with previous work on identity deemed too individualistic (Gergen, 2009).

Blumer, a student of Mead's who is thought to have created the term 'symbolic interactionism' (Heracleous, 2006), argues that it has "come into use as a label for a relatively distinct approach to the study of human group life and human conduct" (1998, p. 1). He postulates that the following three premises underpin symbolic interactionism:

That human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them; the meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one's fellows; and, these meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things he encounters. (Blumer, 1998, p. 2).

There are potential links between symbolic interactionism and semiotics, the study of symbols, in terms of layers of meaning according to significance. Semiotics is applied liberally in the disciplines of English literature and cultural studies (Hawkes, 2003).

A key point to note is the emphasis on symbol-producing capacity, which in turn yields stories, histories and culture (Plummer, 2004). It is these interactions that are investigated, hence shunning more positivistic approaches and quantitative research tools such as laboratory experiments and questionnaires. Plummer (2004, p 1105) argues, "It is a very active view of the social world in which human beings are constantly going about their business, piecing together joint lines of activity and constituting society through these interactions". The interaction between self and others represents a central principle and is of particular relevance in the context of this research.

Heracleous (2006, p. 44) summarises that for symbolic interactionism, "meanings do not reside in objects themselves, as distinct from social action...meanings arise from social interaction". Meaning is then revisited and modified through further

interaction. A central tenet in symbolic interactionism is the argument that “as people we construct our own and each other’s identities through our everyday encounters with each other in social interaction” (Burr, 2003, p. 13).

Researchers such as Bloomer and Hodkinson (2000, p. 589), whose research, alongside the work of their colleagues, constitutes the focus of section 3.4, operate from a symbolic interactionist perspective and this represents a useful synergy with the methodology employed in this study. They write:

Just as it is possible to speak of political, spiritual and even motoring careers, so it is possible to think in terms of a learning career in which other relevant human experiences, and ways of experiencing them, are described in terms of their relationships with the pivotal concept, learning. Thus, learning and dispositions to learning are seen in terms of their relationships with other material and cultural phenomena, including the meanings which learners attribute to those phenomena. (2000, p. 591).

Building on this and the perspective of Burr (2003), Gergen (2009) highlights that a key aspect of symbolic interactionism’s contribution is in the context of the social role that may be negotiated through interaction. This can influence the playing out of scripts as for example the role of teacher, wife or mother. Goffman (1959) writes specifically on the notion of dramaturgy which involves presenting a public self which inherently means hiding or masking certain parts of ourselves, or our lives, from others. Although Gergen’s (2009) interpretation implies formal definition of interaction and it can be argued that scripts are not always there, this may be more the result of a matter of socially prescribed action. This illuminates the impact of recognising human interdependency, how we draw our sense of self from others, depicting how we are interrelated. Gergen (2009), a proponent of social constructionism, argues this does not go far enough and that this view is too individualistic without enough recognition of how we control roles. He asks whether it is enough to simply be a product of others’ actions.

In his work, Gergen develops a compelling argument about the relational self and discussion at this point turns briefly to social constructionism. In defining social constructionism, Burr (2003) proposes that this concept incorporates four

assumptions. These tenets promote: a critical stance toward taken-for-granted knowledge; historical and cultural specificity; the idea knowledge is sustained by social processes; and, that knowledge and social action go together. Burr (2003) argues that these assumptions associated with social constructionism differ significantly from traditional psychology and social psychology and further to this, she articulates the specific differences as: anti-essentialism; questioning realism; historical and cultural specificity of knowledge; language as a pre-condition for thought; language as a form of social action; a focus on interaction and social practices; and, a focus on processes.

Both symbolic interactionism and social constructionism share an interest in meaning and advocate that meaning is created through interaction. Beyond looking at interaction at the individual level, social constructionism also considers societal norms and influences. In addition to potential sceptics of social constructionism for its moves away from experimental methods of social psychology (Hogg and Vaughan, 2008), there are more overt critics of this approach. In the early part of his text, du Gay (2007) questions what is actually gained from determining something is socially constructed. He goes on to say that by using the metaphor of social construction and therefore reinvention, one is in fact robbing the phenomena of any actually determined positive content.

Symbolic interactionism, like social constructionism, is also not without its critics. Although symbolic interactionism has the potential to offer insight into action in the course of daily life, critics argue it overlooks the role of conflict at a societal level and the impact these have on potentially hampering individual action (Giddens, 2009). This is potentially an example of functionalism overriding structuralism. A similar criticism is levelled against social constructionism in the context of power. Nevertheless symbolic interactionism holds much interpretive potential for the exploration of catalysts and triggers in the context of the individual learner as part of this research. The task in research such as this is to strip out the 'acting' in order to discover the 'real person' (Giddens, 2009). Symbolic interactionism identifies significant and generalised others in order to shape the 'I' and the 'me' of identity, but there are reservations about whether such an approach can ever get to the 'heart' of the individual, unlike perhaps the psychodynamic perspective. While symbolic

interactionism provides a useful insight into how individuals actively learn in relationships with others, it also suggests that individuals act according to these interpretations, as actors on a stage or dramatur. This creates a dilemma for the education researcher in understanding what is going on at the ‘heart’ of the individual within, when looking for the potential changes in the sense of self and purpose through lifelong learning.

An approach which has the potential to overcome some of the limitations of symbolic interactionism in the context of this research study is that of interpretative interactionism. Interpretive interactionists can be defined as “interpreters of problematic, lived experiences involving symbolic interaction between two or more persons” (Denzin, 2001, p. 32) and in this sense, are more focused on meaning-making in social contexts, or how individuals learn through their personal experiences. Denzin articulates the development of interpretive interactionism as an attempt to unite symbolic interactionism, phenomenology and hermeneutics (2001; 2004). Seeking to further develop the work of C. Wright Mills, a focus for interpretive interactionists includes “personal troubles and turning-point moments in the lives of interacting individuals” (Denzin, 2004, p. 508) and an exploration of their meaning and impact. This is of particular relevance in the context of articulating punctuation points across a learner’s lifespan that may represent a return to learning, a theme relevant in the lifespan development work articulated in section 3.3, the work of Hodgkinson and colleagues outlined in section 3.4 and central to the ideas in section 3.6 of this thesis.

To clarify the relevance of this approach in the context of this research, insight is offered through a direct quotation from Denzin. He articulates that:

Interpretive interactionists focus on those life experiences, which radically alter and shape the meanings people give to themselves and their life projects. This existential thrust leads to a focus on the “epiphany”. In epiphanies, personal character is manifested and made apparent. By studying these experiences in detail, the researcher is able to illuminate the moments of crisis that occur in a person’s life. These moments are often interpreted, both by the person and others, as turning-point experiences. Having had this experience, the person is never quite the same again. (2004, p. 508).

In order to explore and articulate meaning, this approach seeks to make the world of lived experience visible to the reader (Denzin, 2001; Denzin, 2004). This results in a strong emphasis being placed on the creative and the vivid and this manifests itself in the type of research methods advocated. These include the use of poetry, drama, autoethnography and journalistic techniques. This research study adheres to more what might be termed 'traditional' methods (as outlined in section 4.5) but nevertheless aspires to communicate the aforementioned lived experience. Denzin and others highlight life history as one appropriate research strategy to achieve this goal and life history is integrally linked with this thesis given the interest in the personal learner journey of access students. An explication of this approach and the role it plays in the context of this study follows in the next section.

4.4 Life history approach

The life history method is concerned with individuals' accounts of their experiences in the social world and is useful when seeking to investigate how people make sense of their realities (Musson, 2006; Plummer, 1996). This concern is highly commensurate with the aims of this research. The central tenet of the life history approach considers peoples' subjective interpretation of events, emphasising their individual explanations to explore the meaning they attribute to their experience (Denzin, 2004; Jones, 1983; Musson, 2006). Musson (2006) confirms life history is centred in an interpretive epistemological perspective and additionally it is rooted in the symbolic interactionist paradigm, prioritising the development of meaning from social interaction. In essence:

Through the processes of symbolic interaction, different groups come to create and maintain different worlds, but these worlds are not presumed to be static. Rather, they are fluid and dynamic, colliding and overlapping, continually being created and re-created, changing as the objects that compose them are changed in meaning. Thus, the reflexivity of human beings is central to this perspective and it is this process of reflexivity, how human beings theorise and explain their past, present and future, which the life history method seeks to capture. (Musson, 2006, p. 34).

This idea of fluidity and dynamism resonate strongly with the work of Blair *et al.* (1995) outlined in chapter 3 in the context of their model of adult participation in which the conditions and goals around an adult participant are conceptualised as dynamic and ever-changing and align with the conception of catalysts and triggers in this study.

When adopting the life history approach, as with other interpretive approaches, it is imperative to recognise the researcher as a key part of the research process (Denzin, 1989; Musson, 2006). Researcher reflexivity as well as participant reflexivity constitute key components to facilitate insightful inquiry. In such work there is a need to acknowledge that the researcher is not completely value-free, impartially seeking objective truth. The detailing of the basic assumptions and perspectives of the researcher is therefore an important aspect of the method's validity (Musson, 2006).

In terms of findings emerging from research employing a life history approach, these are often associated with grounded theory (Musson, 2006). Essentially the findings emerge from the data rather than from an imposition of theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Willig, 2008). An explication of the development of the emerging themes drawn from the participants in this study, situated in this approach, with particular reference to grounded theory, is located in section 4.6.

In terms of the origins of this approach, there are links between life history and life course, particularly in the context of the psychology of the lifespan (Giele and Elder, 1998). Life history links closely with lifespan development theory and the work of theorists such as Erikson and Baltes, discussed in section 3.3, is of particular interest. This in turn links to work on the sociology of age and other sociological topics (Denzin, 1989; Giele and Elder, 1998). Crossan *et al.* (2003, p. 57) note that the biographical approach, which draws on symbolic interactionist perspectives, is:

Well established in European adult education research as a framework for exploring the subjectivity, complexity and context of human behaviour, enabling respondents to reflect upon, interpret, give meaning to and construct past events and experiences within a social context.

When examining the links between life history and sociology, it is imperative to consider Denzin's work on interpretive biography. Denzin (2004, p. 507) defines the interpretive biographical method as "the studied use and collection of personal life documents, stories, accounts, and narratives that describe turning-point moments in individuals' lives". In other words the life experience of an individual forms the subject matter of biographical methods. Withnall (2006) cites Birren *et al.* (1996) and Bertaux (1981), who emphasise strongly the potential of biographical methods for the understanding of individual and shared aspects over the life course. Commentators argue that the stories told by participants in the context of their life course and life histories are inherently socially constructed – of direct relevance for an exploration of learner biographies and individual life courses. This point is highly topical in the context of this research, which, while grounded in symbolic interactionism as outlined in section 4.3, cannot overlook work undertaken by researchers such as Boeren *et al.* (2010) and Rees *et al.* (2000) who examine the impact of structural as well as individual forces.

Withnall (2006) and Cole (2000) emphasise that the exploration of a life course perspective is influenced by both collective and individual experiences as well as the context of changing social structures and historical events (Giele and Elder, 1998). In contrast to a positivist approach but in support of biographical methods, Bertaux (1981, p 20) argues that:

The specificity of the biographical method implies 'going beyond' the logical-formal framework and of the mechanistic model which characterises the scientific epistemology.

Of particular interest for this research in the context of the biographical method is Denzin's (1989) conception of epiphanies. Alluded to in his work on interpretive interactionism (see section 4.3), the role of the epiphany is further developed through his work on interpretive biography (Denzin, 1989). His typology of four categories, outlined in chapter 3, incorporate a classification of major events, cumulative/representative events, minor epiphanies and epiphanies related to the association of meaning with reliving an experience. These classifications of epiphany offer potential relevance in the context of articulating and conceptualising catalysts and triggers across learner lifespans in this study and links with the work of

Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997, p 39), discussed in section 3.4, who categorise turning points as structural, forced or self-initiated.

The life history approach offers much appeal in the context of this research and is associated with a number of different research methods. These include diaries, semi-structured interviews and unstructured interviews as well as autobiographies (Denzin, 1989; Musson, 2006), which resonate with symbolic interactionism and interpretive interactionism. The following section explores these data collection methods in depth and reflects on their suitability for use in this work.

4.5 Research methods

As articulated in the above sections, a number of different research methods can be adopted within interpretivist paradigms and these can range from the creative such as video diaries, to more traditional methods, including interviews and participant observation. As previously explored, this study lends itself to a qualitative methodology and this section explores relevant research methods employed in undertaking the primary research. Denzin and Lincoln (1998) assert that qualitative research constitutes a field of inquiry in its own right, spanning different subject areas and a diverse historical development. Crossan *et al.* (2003) observe that previous large-scale quantitative research into participation in adult education is now being supplemented by research employing ethnographic and life history methods with a view to eliciting more detailed findings on individual perspectives.

When considering the diversity of methodologies available in qualitative research, Denzin and Lincoln (1998: 3) invoke the term *bricolage*, defined as a “pieced-together, close-knit set of practices that provide solutions to a problem in a concrete situation”. In this construction the qualitative researcher as *bricoleur* uses the tools in their methodological trade to produce a “complex, dense, reflexive, collage-like creation that represents the researcher’s images, understandings and interpretations of the world or phenomenon under analysis” (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998, p. 4). Crotty argues that such an analogy “invites us to approach the object in a spirit of openness to its potential for new or richer meaning” and that in essence, this invites ‘reinterpretation’ (Crotty, 2004, p. 51).

It is this notion of openness and search for meaning that guided the selection of research methods in this study. Eschewing more positivist methods in view of the interpretive stance underpinning the research and reflecting on approaches and existing work associated with the identification of turning-point moments, a range of methods were explored and these include ethnography, participant observation, interviews, focus groups and the critical incident technique. After careful research and reflection on a range of primary research methods relevant to adult learning, the chosen methods include interviews and group interviews (also known as focus groups) supported by a variation of the critical incident technique. These methods were selected as the most appropriate tools to access the heart of the enquiry.

Two valuable methods considered for use within the study that were ultimately eschewed include ethnography and participant observation. Ethnography is aligned with an interpretive philosophical framework (Brewer, 2006) and is “a method of studying human groups and societies whereby researchers immerse themselves in them, seeking to understand their traditions, practices, and beliefs through close contact, identification and interaction with members” (Gabriel, 2008, p. 99). Similar to ethnography, participant observation is rooted in anthropological work (Robson, 2005). It is defined as “research in which the researcher immerses him- or herself in a social setting for an extended period of time, observing behaviour, listening to what is said in conversations both between others and with the fieldworker” (Bryman, 2008, p. 697). It can be difficult to distinguish between participant observation and ethnography. Participant observation is often associated with psychological work while ethnographic studies are closely aligned with sociological research. Although both constitute very valid methods and can produce rich data and thick description, they were not felt to be the most appropriate for this study. As this study seeks detailed insight about individual learner journeys these methods were rejected in favour of methods more suited to eliciting more individualised insight from direct and open dialogue with participants. The methods chosen were designed to enable engagement in detailed, open discussion with participants to probe their past, present and anticipated future learning experiences.

Interviews, a chosen method for this study, facilitate such direct enquiry and are described as the favourite method of the qualitative researcher (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998). Denzin and Lincoln (1998) propose the interview conversation is not a neutral tool as the interviewer creates the situation and the responses are grounded in the situational episode. A number of types of interview have been defined and these include: the structured interview, where all participants are asked the exact same questions; the semi-structured interview, where a schedule exists but the questions can be tailored and the sequence changed; the unstructured interview, where the interviewer typically only has a list of topics; and, particularly relevant in the context of this research, the oral history or life history interview, which is unstructured or semi-structured in nature and designed to invite respondents to recall events from their past (Bryman, 2008).

Writing in the context of adult returners to learning, Merrill and Alheit (2004, p. 151) note, “the life history interview is a social process and a social construction between the researcher and the researched”. Biographies of adult learners serve to demonstrate and explore the complexities in their lives (Merrill and Alheit, 2004). In the context of researching community learning, Brookfield (1995, p. 137) argues, “interviews are a particularly appropriate tool of investigation for those inquiries which have an idiographic rather than a nomothetic rational[e]; that is, which are concerned with depicting the highly specific nature of individual experience rather than advancing broad generali[s]ations”. Denzin (1989) defines idiographic research as assuming individual cases are unique and that interactions are shaped by the individual who created it.

Group interviews, also employed within this research, constitute an extension of the individual interview. Originally associated with marketing research, focus groups or group interviews are growing in popularity within social science research (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998; Field, 2000). A group interview is a qualitative data collection technique in which a moderator directs the questioning to at least two participants (Bryman, 2008; Denzin and Lincoln, 1998). The dynamics in group interviewing can be challenging for the interviewer to manage and a key responsibility of the interviewer is to ensure all participants have the opportunity to respond. Frey and Fontana (1993) argue the task of the interviewer is twofold: managing the script of

questions and responding to the evolving patterns of group interaction. Dominance by particular respondents or the development of ‘groupthink’ represent potential disadvantages of the method (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998). Groupthink, a coin termed by Janis (1972), is a phenomenon that can occur when people in a group compromise their values and beliefs in order to maintain order and secure consensus at the expense of their own views, however in the context of a research focus group, it is possible for the facilitator to be aware of this potential pitfall and to ask probing questions accordingly. Advantages of this method include stimulation for respondents, richness of data and in the particular context of this research, recall aiding and being cumulative and elaborative to borrow terms from Denzin and Lincoln (1998). The element of recall aiding and the notion of ‘scaffolding’ represent particular benefits in the context of this work. Additionally taking part in a group interview can potentially be perceived as less threatening by participants and able to offer an increased level of ‘anonymity’, valuable strengths when seeking to place interviewees at ease and inviting them to share very personal individual biographies as in the case of this research. Denzin (2009) writes strongly in support of the use of focus groups in the context of the methodology underpinning this work.

When considering qualitative research in the area of lifelong learning, Field (2000) argues focus groups hold much potential as a data collection technique. Field (2000) advocates the focus group as it invites a move from the methodological individualism that can characterise lifelong learning research. He argues biographical narrative can be too highly individualised (within the life history approach) and that surveys of larger populations typically aggregate the individual view, failing to grapple with relationships and institutions that constitute the collective whole as evident in the adult education participation work of Blair *et al.* (1995) and Crossan *et al.* (2003). In view of this, focus groups hold much appeal for lifelong learning research as they “offer one way of actively involving and engaging with the agendas of those who are being researched; of exploring their shared everyday experiences, values and orientations; and witnessing the nature of relationships between individuals” (Field, 2000, p. 334). Although one could argue that when considered collectively, a compilation of individual narratives is not necessarily highly individualised, focus groups are relevant for this study due to the advantages cited in the preceding

paragraph and it is possible to extract the contributions of individuals from the group narrative when the interaction is carefully recorded and transcribed.

In conjunction with focus groups, this research also uses a version of the critical incident technique in order to invite participant recall of the ‘epiphanies’ and turning point experiences (to borrow the language of Denzin, 2004) that have impacted upon their learner journeys. The supplement of a tailored version of the critical incident technique holds much appeal as an ideal vehicle for eliciting such responses and when utilised in written form as in this study, also offers participants the opportunity for non-verbal disclosure that overcomes a potential weakness of the chosen group interview method where participants may not wish to share certain personal information in front of their peers. The first narrative that Crossan *et al.* (2003) describe in their work highlights the impact of critical incidents on a return to learning, which resonates with both the work of Edwards (1993) and Merrill (1999), and highlights the appropriateness of employing a method that is designed to encourage recall of this from participants.

An adapted form of the critical incident technique holds much appeal for exploring catalysts and triggers in lifelong learning. Originally developed by Flanagan in the 1950s and associated with positivist investigation, the current use of critical incident technique (CIT) in the social sciences is as an investigative tool associated with research in the interpretative and phenomenological paradigms (Chell, 2006). Chell (2006, p. 47) states it is the intention of the interview using this technique to “capture the thought processes, the frame of reference and the feelings about an incident or set of incidents, which have meaning for the respondent”. In the context of this research, participants have been asked to outline, in diagrammatic fashion, the key ‘incidents’ that have shaped their biographies and their decisions to engage with the particular access to higher education course they are undertaking (see appendix C for an example life path). As a frame of reference, Schratz (1996) sought to explore learning biographies by using critical incidents and this represents a useful point of comparison. Although in the context of education more widely than lifelong learning research, Cope (2000, 2003) has used critical incidents to explore entrepreneurial learning and higher-level learning of entrepreneurs.

In view of the search for potential critical incidents, in the context of potential catalysts and triggers, across the lifespan and the concept of epiphanies (Denzin, 1989), this study opts to use a critical incident technique methodology to supplement the interview method. This involves exploring critical incidents by asking participants to complete a critical life path (appendix D). The life chart is referenced in Giele and Elder (1998) and has been used by Back and Bourque (1970) and Clausen (1972) but in this literature, focuses on life satisfaction at different junctures across the lifespan. Saunders and Allsop (1985) report on the use of life path charts in addiction research when investigating crises in the lives of former alcoholics and the impact of treatment interventions on their recovery. Punctuation points highlighted in their illustrative case study include a conviction for drunk driving, a spouse leaving, redundancy and a period of homelessness. Unlike in the work of Saunders and Allsop (1985), participants completing the life charts in a number of these published studies are acknowledging age across the horizontal (x) axis, from childhood to the present day, with satisfaction appearing on the vertical (y) axis. Points are plotted for satisfaction on the y-axis and are marked in terms of time on the x-axis and participants are asked to provide a brief label where they intersect (see figure 4 for a simplified example). Events cited include ‘met husband’, ‘post-partum depression’ and ‘husband’s death’ (Giele and Elder, 1998, p. 201).

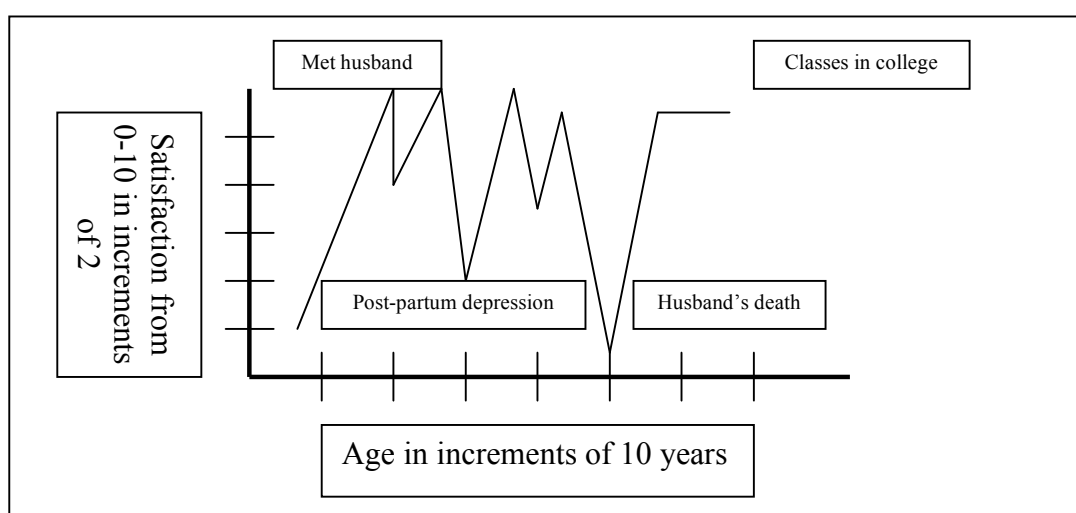


Figure 4. Simplified sample life path chart based on Giele and Elder (1998, p. 201)

The critical life path task used in this study focuses less on the detail of an x and y-axis and instead more freely asks participants to identify experiences, events and influences they perceive as important to their personal learner journeys across a single horizontal axis (appendix E). The rationale for this is that asking participants to make a detailed value judgement about the 'numerical' impact of an event in addition to the task of having to recall events and influences through their lifespan has the potential to prove distracting (as identified during the pilot phase of the study – see section 4.6). Many participants in this study inherently 'rated' the impact of an event by depicting it as positive or negative and using lines going up and down to symbolise positive and negative impacts but nevertheless the simplified format means that instructions given to participants can be kept to a minimum to avoid introducing both confusion about the activity and bias by offering too detailed an explanation about what a completed life path chart might look like.

A potential negative aspect of the critical incident technique cited in the literature is the predication of the method on there being incidents on which a participant can report. There is a risk in certain research scenarios that no specific event(s) can be identified, although it is interesting to reflect on whether this is because they genuinely did not happen, or they did but have legitimately been forgotten because of their insignificance or whether they have in fact been repressed. Chell (2006) counters that the nature of events deemed 'critical' means they are likely to be recalled. In the context of this research a risk of non-recall is not of central concern due to the multiple methods employed and the opportunity for participants to discuss and recount during the group interviews to stimulate recollection.

On the basis of careful research and reflection, it was decided that semi-structured interviews conducted in a group format and supplemented by a variation of the critical incident technique would constitute the foundation of the research methods for this thesis. This is based on a combination of the depth that can be achieved by interview, the benefits offered by group interviews and the strong advocacy offered by Denzin (2009) and Field (2000) for this method in conjunction with the relevance of CIT. It can be argued that the marriage of the critical incident technique and the group interview in this way offers originality of method.

4.6 Data collection, analysis and research ethics

As detailed in the above section, semi-structured interviews and group interviews with a modified version of the critical incident technique represent the chosen research methods in this study. This section provides an overview of the data collection process including details about the research sample, discussion of how the data analysis has been conducted and a reflection on the underpinning research ethics.

As outlined in section 2.4, adult and community learning can take many forms and be undertaken for a variety of purposes. Adult education is often associated with a tripartite classification: informal; formal; and, non-formal. Informal learning undeniably constitutes a key element of lifelong learning and without demeaning the benefits associated with participating in informal and non-formal learning, this study focuses on participants engaging in formal learning activities, specifically access to higher education courses as outlined in section 2.6. All of the learners are participating voluntarily in the programmes of study, as opposed to being sponsored by an employer to attend for example. As discussed earlier in the thesis, access courses have developed in response to equality of access issues and represent an additional option for mature students wishing to gain entry to higher education. As access courses are designed to facilitate access to higher education and a significant majority of students aspire to study degree-level courses (Wakeford, 1993), access students represent a population with a unique and potentially very focused set of learner motivations and aspirations.

The age of participants is a further key dynamic to consider. Application of the term ‘older’ learner is fraught with conceptual difficulties. Schuller and Watson (2009) cite four age-related stages and ‘older’ learners can then be related to the second, third and fourth age categories as appropriate. Some researchers and commentators use indices such as pre-retirement or post-work (see Withnall, 2006). NIACE use the age of 50 as the basis for their work with older learners (Withnall *et al.*, 2004). Malin and Hunt (2010, p. 4) eschew numeric categorisations of age and a specific definition of older as they acknowledge it is a relative concept. Instead they offer an insightful rationale for the age of participants recruited to their study by observing it will be of relevance to those experiencing “a set of circumstances more likely to be encountered in later

life than at any particular age”. In the context of this research study, most access students are likely to have experienced some sort of gap in their formal learning and this automatically means working with somewhat older learners on the so-called delayed trajectory or potentially ‘lifelong learners’ as classified by Rees *et al.* (2000). This has the potential to yield very diverse age demographics, an outcome addressed by both Withnall (2006) and Antikainen (1998) in their work, but in the context of this study, the relevance of age is overridden by the interest in individual learner journeys and wherever participants are in their own personal reengagement trajectories. Feinstein *et al.* (2007) cited in Swain and Hammond (2011, p. 592) propose that there is no “universally accepted definition of what constitutes a ‘mature’ learner”. Swain and Hammond (2011, p. 592) synthesise the work of James (1995) and Waller (2006) to argue that the diversity that constitutes mature learners is associated with their “age, life circumstances, personal values, motivations for studying and the positive outcomes they accrue from the experience”.

The above discussion reflecting on the uniqueness of access learner trajectories and the age of participants sets the background to the data collection process that underpins the central primary research element of this thesis. The data collection phase involved a total of five stages, outlined below in table 4, and explicated sequentially below.

Phase	Activity
Phase I	Review of the NIACE Adult Learner of the Year case studies
Phase II	16 interviews with local adult education professionals including access course tutors who granted subsequent permission to interview their cohorts
Phase III	Pilot interviews with six adult learners to help shape the interview schedule
Phase IV	Five test interviews with personal contacts to develop familiarity with the interview schedule and refine the critical life path document
Phase V	Semi-structured group interviews with 31 access students

Table 4. Summary of data collection phases

Phase I – Conducted during autumn 2009 and winter 2010, this phase involved a review of the Adult Learner of the Year case studies compiled by NIACE for 2006, 2007 and 2008 resulting in 56 learner cases (16 in 2006, 21 in 2007 and 19 in 2008) to develop a sense of different learner biographies and to facilitate the use of the

constructs employed in the BBC project (referenced in chapter 1) drawn from Kloep *et al.*'s (2009) work (Appendix B). This served as a useful analytical exercise to stimulate the grounded search for potential circumstantial catalysts and triggers and to create familiarity with possible influences on adult learners and the diversity of learner engagement journeys.

Phase II – Conducted during spring 2010 and revisited during spring 2011, this phase involved undertaking 16 interviews with local adult education tutors and supporters of adult education across the South East Wales region. This provided important interview experience and resulted in snowball sampling (Lewis-Beck *et al.*, 2004) to secure additional tutor interviews. Conducting the 16 interviews provided useful information about the perceptions of tutors on student motivation while offering insight into the diverse stories student participants would share in the future during the access student data collection phase. This offered a helpful picture of the varied influences in adult learners' lives that can prompt a return to learning alongside a wider contextualisation of circumstances within the South Wales Valleys area. While the notion of triangulation is very bound in a positivist quest for validity, reliability and generalisability so the term is applied here in its loosest sense, seeking the perspective of the tutors offered a useful springboard to digest the subsequent views shared by students. The tutors were provided with a participant information sheet and a consent form (appendices F and G) and all of the interviews were audio recorded. A copy of the interview schedule is located at appendix H. Further detail about the key associated ethical considerations is explored at the end of this section. The researcher transcribed each interview verbatim and the transcripts were anonymised. Each tutor was assigned a code such as TM1 for a male tutor and TF1 for a female tutor. The grounded themes that emerged from the tutor interviews are discussed in detail in chapter 5 and an overview of the tutor codes is located at appendix I.

Phase III – Conducted during summer 2010, this phase involved running in-depth interviews with six adult learners, recruited from a local higher education institution's summer school programme to constitute a pilot study. The function of a pilot study is fundamentally to serve as an exploratory process and to offer practice rather than the generation of findings (Bryman and Bell, 2007). Nevertheless these interviews yielded interesting results about the ability of several participants to articulate a

specific triggering event for their return to learning. Conducting these interviews also raised the possibility of undertaking group interviews in the right circumstances during the main primary data collection phase. As with the tutor interviews, interviewing these students helped to build confidence and hone the researcher's interviewing skills. In terms of developing an interview schedule, previous work undertaken in the field was consulted. Blair *et al.* (1995, p. 632) for example asked their learners via semi-structured interview:

1. The reasons why they had originally decided to return to education
2. The factors which had influenced their choice of provider and their choice of provision
3. The guidance they had received in these initial stages
4. Their plans for the future

These questions helped to shape the interview schedule that formed the basis of discussion during the main data collection phase around students' interpretations of their past and present experiences and their future intentions.

Phase IV – Conducted during autumn 2010, this phase involved interviewing five personal contacts, unconnected to the research study, informally to develop familiarity with the interview schedule and to practice explaining the critical life path document to explore its usability (appendix D). This served as helpful practice for the engagement with actual research participants and resulted in the simplification of the form by removing the concept of an x and y-axis and the verbal instructions given to accompany the exercise. The sample interview schedule included questions about the experience of formal education, education undertaken since leaving compulsory education, what prompted participation on the current course and how individuals would describe the experience of doing the course as well as their future plans. This directly informed the semi-structured final schedule used with the access learners in the following phase.

Phase V – Conducted during spring 2011, this phase involved undertaking semi-structured group interviews with 31 access students at two further education colleges in the South Wales Valleys area. Access to the students was negotiated through, and

generously granted by, two access course tutors (interviewed during phase II) who acted as pivotal gatekeepers (Saunders, 2006) to allow the research to be undertaken. Students were provided with a summary of the research study when invited to participate (see appendix J) and when they consented, were provided with a participant information sheet and invited to sign a consent form (appendices K and G). Students were interviewed in groups of between two and five individuals on the campus where they were studying and each student was then asked to complete a critical life path. In total 31 students were interviewed and 30 critical life path documents were collected. This discrepancy resulted as one participant, F16, needed to leave campus prior to the completion of the life path exercise and was subsequently not contactable. All the interview data was audio recorded and transcribed verbatim by the researcher and pictorial representations of ‘critical’ incidents through the lifespan have been retained to allow detailed interpretation. All the data has been anonymised and coded as M1 to M7 for male participants and F1 to F24 for female participants. Themes emerging from the access student data are discussed in detail in chapter 6.

Data collection and analysis are not, and should not be, conceptualised as separate stages according to multiple research methods authors including Bryman (2008) and Miles and Huberman (1994) among others. In the context of this study, the 31 access learners are conceptualised as individual cases (Stake, 2006) with each individual case constituting a unique learner trajectory. Musson (2006) argues that findings in a study such as this often emerge from grounded theory. Grounded theory holds particular relevance in the context of this work given that catalysts and triggers as they are conceptualised here have never been considered or investigated previously in this way.

Grounded theory is “designed to facilitate the process of ‘discovery’, or theory generation, and therefore embodies one of the key concerns of qualitative methodology” (Willig, 2008, p. 32) and represents a method designed to “describe the world of the person or persons under study” (Stern, 1994, p. 2.73 in Cullis and Hussey, 2009, p. 84). The method is a powerful vehicle as it allows interpretation of real experiences and facilitates a “systematic means to efficiently analyse large quantities of unstructured qualitative data” (Lansisalmi *et al.*, 2006, p. 243).

Essentially grounded theory procedures are “designed to build an explanation or to generate a theory around the core or central theme that emerges from your data” (Saunders *et al.*, 2003, p. 398).

Summarising the seminal work of Glaser and Strauss (1967), Gibson and Brown (2009, p 27) propose, “grounded theory is essentially an approach to creating theory from research and data analysis” as opposed to using data to test theories. Gibson and Brown (2009, p. 26) argue that grounded theory work has become so far-reaching in qualitative research that it is almost “synonymous with theory-orientated work”. Despite this acceptance, the perspectives of Glaser and Strauss, the founding fathers of the method, have diverged dramatically in recent decades. Glaser applies a less prescriptive approach to the process of analysis and seeks a wholly inductive interpretation of the data (Glaser, 1992). Glaser is adamant that as part of this process, existing research should not influence the theoretical outcomes in any sort of deductive capacity (Glaser, 1992; Willig, 2008) and the researcher should possess no pre-suppositions (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2003). A recent criticism of such a grounded theory approach that eschews any prior engagement with relevant literature (as advocated by Glaser) is that it is no longer practicable as researchers are often required by institutional procedures to demonstrate engagement with existing research and to provide evidence that they will be filling a gap in the body of knowledge (Gibson and Brown, 2009). Nevertheless grounded analysis in this form can serve as a helpful tool to facilitate the emergence of theoretical orientations from research.

Strauss, now working with Corbin, argues that some prior engagement with literature is necessary and inevitable (Strauss, 1987; Strauss and Corbin, 1990) and unlike Glaser, they propose a much more systematic, prescriptive approach to looking at the data in order to seek the manifestation of patterns in a manner which can be argued to be quite mechanistic (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2003). The subsequent use of coding paradigms adds a deductive element and it is argued that this is the result of axial coding (Willig, 2008). Strauss and Corbin propose three coding stages as part of their grounded theory method: open coding (involving the disaggregation of data into units), axial coding (a process of recognising relationships between categories) and, selective coding (involving the integration of categories to produce a theory) (Saunders *et al.*, 2003). As part of open coding, emphasis is placed on deriving

meaning from the setting and subjects being studied. At the selective coding stage, “emphasis is placed on recognising and developing the relationships between the principal categories that have emerged from this grounded approach in order to develop an explanatory theory” (Saunders *et al.*, 2003, p. 400).

Grounded theory researchers use a number of strategies such as constant comparative analysis, theoretical sampling and theoretical coding (Willig, 2008). As part of constant comparative analysis the researcher keeps breaking down the categories and comparing them back to the data source in order to achieve theoretical saturation. Silverman (1993, p. 46 in Cullis and Hussey, 2009) observes that grounded theory involves three main stages: an initial attempt to create categories to illuminate the data; an attempt to saturate the categories to indicate their importance; and, the development of a general analytic framework with wider applicability. Given the context specific nature of much grounded theory work it is often not possible or appropriate to generalise the findings. Instead there is scope to refer to the development of a context-specific substantive model. From this, patterns and themes can be drawn out for observation in other contexts (Cullis and Hussey, 2009).

When conducting grounded analysis the coding categories applied to the data become more interpretive and analytic as they develop beyond labelled groupings and it can be argued they became more abstract (Willig, 2008). The categories assigned to the data are integrated into meaningful units as the analysis develops and findings emerge. With grounded analysis, versus content analysis, the researcher goes by feel and intuition, aiming to produce common or contradictory themes and patterns that form the basis of interpretation. This approach interprets the data more holistically (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2003). While authors such as Strauss and Corbin (1998) advocate a very structured approach to conducting grounded theory with procedures to follow at each stage of analysis, some critics argue this overly fragments the data and as a result reduces the integrity of it. Others, adopting a less prescriptive view, advocate grounded theory “may be approached as a strategy as much as a set of procedures” (Saunders *et al.*, 2003, p. 398). This results in the analysis being conducted in a less formalised and procedural way while still achieving a systematic and rigorous approach yielding a grounded explanation or theory.

Cullis and Hussey (2009) argue that despite the three sequential and hierarchical stages of coding outlined by Strauss and Corbin, in reality all three occur simultaneously and the codes are discovered and created interpretively. While the founding views of seminal authors Glaser and Strauss have diverged over several decades about key principles of the approach, the relevance of theory building in the context of interpretive work such as this is central (Willig, 2008). Gibson and Brown (2009) reiterate that while there is not one unified approach within grounded theory research and there are a number of different distinctive approaches, these nevertheless contain a number of similarities.

A number of research methods practitioners highlight that employing a grounded approach demands intense time commitments and levels of reflection. It can be argued that given the lack of existing research within this field of catalysts and triggers research, a grounded theory approach is both necessitated and highly appropriate as it enables the identification of rich contextualised data and starts from uncovering the conceptual scheme in a contextual way without any predetermined theoretical or conceptual framework (Lansisalmi *et al.*, 2006, p. 242). Although this study proposes a conceptual framework at the end of chapter 3, this has been constructed purely as an empty frame for analysis, waiting to be populated with the experiences of students from their own perspectives.

Building on the idea that grounded theory and interpretive research align closely, Charmaz (1990) introduces a social constructionist version of grounded theory which goes beyond the idea of theories emerging from the data and proposes that theory is constructed by the researcher from an interaction with the data (Willig, 2008). Consequently the background of the researcher and the decisions taken by them shape the findings. It can be argued therefore that the research findings represent one reading rather than the only truth (Willig, 2008). Pidgeon and Harwood (1997) invoke the term theory generation instead of discovery in relation to grounded theory in order to encapsulate the constructionist component of theory development (Willig, 2008).

Denzin (1989, p. 3) argues the qualitative researcher:

Is not an objective, politically neutral observer who stands outside and above the study of the social world. Rather, the researcher is historically and locally situated within the very processes being studied. A gendered, historical self is brought to this process. This self, as a set of shifting identities, has its own history with the situated practices that define and shape the public issues and private troubles being studied.

Furthermore, Denzin (1989, p. 43) argues “value-free interpretive research is impossible” and this is because “every researcher brings his or her preconceptions and interpretations to the problem being studied”. This results in a situation called the hermeneutical circle or hermeneutical situation that all scholars are caught in. As a result researchers need to state their meanings and values about the research phenomena prior to interpreting it according to Denzin (1989). Remaining aloof and trying to be an objective observer is the worst kind of subjectivism according to Blumer (1976).

Miller (1993, p. 8) proposes that, “researchers concerned with understanding the process of adult learning need to be centrally concerned with their own learning, and need to acknowledge the autobiographical dimensions of their research”. Heeding this advice from Miller, Walters (2000), when researching mature students, constructs an autobiography of her experiences as a mature learner (Walters, 1996). Evans (2000) writes about the need to acknowledge baggage in research and the impact such baggage might have on both methodology and subsequent interpretation. Saban (2000, p. 515) writes that “the qualitative researcher is the main instrument for collecting and analysing the study data, and the credibility of a qualitative inquiry is to a great extent dependent on the quality of the researcher”. As a consequence, researcher reflexivity is an important component of any such study.

In the context of the data analysis undertaken within this study, a grounded approach offers much appeal and relevance. Although existing literature from the wider field has been consulted against the guidance of Glaser, there is little specific material to draw on or pre-existing constructs to impose in relation to detailed catalysts and triggers research and consequently the findings emerge directly from the data itself. In developing the findings, while the highly procedural approach advocated by Strauss and Corbin has not been adhered to, nevertheless the themes have emerged through thorough and pain-staking interrogation of the data. The audio recordings and

transcripts have been examined and analysed repeatedly in detail to identify codes, extract themes, highlight recurring issues and draw out particularly poignant experiences voiced by participants. The data has been allowed to continue speaking for itself through the inclusion of evocative and contextualising quotations.

Although an extensive range of qualitative data analysis software exists (Drisko, 2013), much of the grounded analysis and coding drawing out the different perspectives of the tutor and student participants in this study has been undertaken manually. A secure online data analysis platform entitled Dedoose has been used to identify and draw out the initial and revised coding before breaking the text back into separate themed Microsoft Word documents for manual manipulation and examination. The codes and themes that emerged from the tutor and student data form the basis of the discussion in chapters 5 and 6. In order to try and maximise the aforementioned reflexivity, two peers, not associated with the research study, have reviewed the transcripts and thematic coding from the tutor and student interviews to confirm the construction of the analysis and to strive for, what is known in positivist, statistical terms as, inter-rater reliability in order to achieve the most thorough and rigorous means of analysis possible. Analysis continued until a point of perceived data saturation was reached (Saumure and Given, 2008).

A desire for 'integrity' throughout the entire research process from initial design to data collection and analysis has been sought (Macfarlane, 2009). Macfarlane's notion of researching with integrity extends beyond merely acknowledging research ethics and instead to a more holistic conceptualisation of how research is conducted and this idea has informed the approach adopted across this work. Although the idea of integrity represents an overarching goal, the mechanics of research ethics are nevertheless imperative.

A central concern for ethics is about respecting the research participants for the time they have donated and their highly valuable, and in this case very personal, contributions. The research proposal for this study was approved by the ethics committee at the (former) University of Glamorgan and the Faculty Ethics Officer approved the primary research undertaken. In order to respect the formal process of attaining a high level of ethical standards, as outlined above, all participants have

been given a detailed participant information sheet and all participants have signed a form confirming their consent to take part (appendices F, G, and K). At the start of each interview/group interview the purpose of the research was explained clearly to participants and the information sheet was summarised. All participants were also made aware verbally of what would happen to the data and that they were free to withdraw from the study at any time without giving a reason. All data has been stored securely and the names of all participants have been anonymised to protect the identity of individuals and institutions. All participants in the group interviews were made expressly aware that disclosure was entirely at their own discretion. Two participants responded directly to this and chose to disclose particularly personal information non-verbally by using the life path document, a key benefit of employing this multi method.

4.7 Chapter summary and link to findings chapters

This chapter has explored the methodological underpinnings of the research, beginning with a discussion of the adoption of an interpretivist stance and the epistemological and ontological implications. In search of the meaning learners apply in their journeys when returning to education in the context of this work, this study adopts a symbolic interactionist perspective. In order to capture the rich and personal experiences of the participating adult returners, the study is rooted in a life history approach, drawing on the work of Denzin by exploring interpretive interactionism and interpretive biography. After considering alternative research methods available in the qualitative researchers' armoury, section 4.5 provides an overview of, and rationale for, the methods used in this study: interviews; group interviews; and, an adapted version of the critical incident technique. The data collection, including the pilot study consisting of six in-depth interviews and the engagement of the 31 learner case studies, is detailed at section 4.6 and this is followed by a discussion of the grounded approach to analysis adopted and a reflection on the importance of the ethical underpinnings of the study. Chapters 5 and 6 that follow present the thematic outcomes of the primary research and the detailed findings from an interpretivist perspective that yield the original contribution to knowledge associated with the highly personal catalysts and triggers articulated by access students in the South Wales Valleys in this study.

Chapter 5 - Thematic analysis of tutor interviews

5.1 Chapter Overview

As outlined in the methodology chapter, phase II of the data collection stage involved conducting interviews with 16 adult education tutors acting as expert witnesses located in the wider region the study is situated in. Their perspective was sought to provide an insight into different aspects of adult education participation in relation to catalysts and triggers in this geographical context prior to conducting interviews with adult learners. A spread of tutors from different sectors of adult education was sought and participants were involved in the voluntary adult education sector, community education as well as access provision through local further education colleges. The tutors and their associated organisations were selected on the basis of their breadth of knowledge and experience and educational remit. The researcher instigated direct contact with individual tutors and in the case of the voluntary sector tutors, an interview with one tutor resulted in interviews with two others and a similar snowball sampling experience resulted from contact within the community education sector and with the access tutors. An overview of the anonymised tutor codes and their associated sector is located at appendix I.

The questions posed were generated on the basis of a review of the literature into South Wales and adult participation as well as through reflection on the type of information being sought through the tutor interactions. The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format in order to begin building detailed responses in relation to the research questions. A copy of the interview schedule is located at appendix H. Prior to conducting the interviews the schedule was explored with two personal contacts to ensure clarity. Once transcribed by the researcher, the transcripts and associated notes from the interviews were analysed using a grounded theory approach in order to elicit relevant themes in relation to wider environmental circumstances within the region, tutor insight about education generally and tutor perspectives on adult learner participation.

This resulted in the emergence of 16 sub-themes, incorporated within five broad themes, which were reviewed by two colleagues to secure broad agreement on their thematic content. The themes include:

- 5.2 Institutional and wider issues which comment on the wider context (containing four sub-themes)
- 5.3 Constraining and enabling forces associated with, and impacting on, participation (containing four sub-themes)
- 5.4 Tutor empathy and awareness of student fear
- 5.5 The transformative power of education
- 5.6 Aspects of individual participation (containing six sub-themes)

What follows is an explication of each theme designed to begin primary examination of adult participation and access course engagement specifically within the South Wales Valleys area in the context of catalysts and triggers. There is merit in noting that all of the tutors interviewed work with a diverse range adult returners, many of whom have a mixed personal history with education and a resultant fragile learning identity. This chapter concludes with an overview of the key findings that emerge from the tutor interviews as they pertain to the research questions.

5.2 Institutional and wider issues

In the context of institutional and wider issues, tutor discussion is coded around four broad themes: South Wales and generativity; funding constraints; assessment on entry to a programme; and, access courses. These are each examined in turn.

South Wales and Generativity:

In discussing South Wales as a geographic location, one tutor (TF5) remarked on the open, fluid nature of the region as opposed to the more closed stereotype that can be perceived:

I think there is a stereotype of the South Wales Valleys of tight, close-knit communities and people there who have lived there a long, long time and they have got a particular set of values and attitudes. And it is all

very static and fixed but that is not correct at all. In my groups there are always people with accents that are not South Wales accents.

When discussing the Communities First agenda in the context of South Wales, another tutor (TF6) spoke in terms of grass roots work in order to give those living in disadvantaged and deprived areas a second chance. She spoke of “boosting their chances of having, achieving and boosting personal development”.

One tutor (TF1) spoke of a reluctance to travel among certain learner populations, an issue particularly prevalent in lower income communities which impacts upon access to provision.

In terms of the challenges facing the South Wales Valleys, two tutors expressed particularly strong views. First, a non-access tutor (TF3) spoke about the money spent to regenerate the area and the perceived limited impact of the interventions. In her words:

When was the last time that politicians actually got out and walked around the Valleys?! They are more than happy to make policies that impact on peoples' lives. Millions has gone into the Valleys, especially with ESF money. If you ask people in the Valleys they would say where the f**k has that gone?! Has it made their lives better? A bit of a mall in the centre and fancy new learning centre but what about me and my family? Stop talking about money and realise that what people want is respect for themselves. It does enrage me. They miss the point all the time. If nobody has got a job where you are then nobody has but at least you are in it together. It is the one person who sticks their head above the parapet. They have thrown so much money at it. You could have given everyone a free Chinese takeaway. There are millions going into adult education but what is it actually doing? Is it making a difference? In my ten years, the same courses are going on.

The lack of jobs in the area and individuals' desire for respect represent two crucial observations in conjunction with the idea of an individual deciding to try and break away from the status quo. Second, an access tutor (TF9) voiced concern about the scale of the basic skills problem across the South Wales Valleys, highlighting there is a significant deficit in literacy and particularly numeracy skills, a view commensurate with much of the evidence presented in chapter 2. In the context of access, the tutor reported that many students are capable of mastering the subject area but that their literacy and basic skills adversely impact upon the academic level at which they can

operate and this can result in students withdrawing from the programme. Speaking more generically about the scale of the basic skills problem the tutor stated:

There is a phenomenally high number of people in this area, 1 in 3 adults aged 16 to 60 in this area, do not have level 1 literacy skills which is the bottom end of the GCSE. Phenomenally high. Some are under the entry levels which is under an 11 year old for literacy and numeracy.

This deficit in basic skills has a resulting impact upon students' abilities to undertake courses such as the access programme. In addition to discussing the challenges presented by basic skills deficiencies, the same tutor spoke of other challenges facing the region associated with social and economic deprivation:

This area, social and economic deprivation is phenomenal. People don't have money in this area. If you look at the unemployment, the sickness rate in this area, there is not a great work ethic as such. These people are really committed to what they want to do and it is our duty to give them the best chance to do that and not give them any false ideas that you can do this and it is easy. It is not a 2 year A-level. It is a very intensive course. Tutors have to be hand-picked really. They have to be very supportive. What can go hand-in-hand with the socio-economic deprivation is that people can have very great personal problems. They have horrific problems a lot of them. And what they are dealing with, you have got to really give them credit for what they achieve. A lot of the tutor time is taken up in a pastoral capacity really. Horrific stories of people's children being taken into care, of somebody's husband being arrested and going into prison. And it is all of these day-to-day things in their lives. They take it in their stride and I am left thinking how do you cope? And then go home and do a 2,000 word essay or whatever. And again, with money and things, not all of them have computers at home and the things that people tend to take for granted now. So they come here and use our centre here for computers. They can book them out.

The above quotation highlights not only the additional challenges facing students in terms of not having IT facilities at home but also the high level of commitment of those students who have opted to undertake access programmes. This ability to flourish and the decision to overcome potential adversity is at the very heart of this investigation.

Speaking about the remit of their FE college more generally, one tutor (TM5) described the importance of the college's "learning zone" for students on all courses. The college teaches vocational crafts and trades, often to students who found

compulsory schooling academically challenging. They cite examples of students with academic abilities equivalent to a five year-old child who are unable to write more than their names and addresses. As a result there is considerable demand within the institution for the learning zone and in the view of tutor TF9, this is a situation mirrored across colleges throughout the region.

In her words:

I think it is incredible in this area. We take a lot of the school children, 13 or 14 year olds who have been excluded from all the schools in the area. So now they are coming to learn a trade with very little schooling. They probably didn't even engage. They've only gone as far as top juniors so they have got no skills. It is a huge, huge problem that I firmly, I am very passionate about giving people a second chance. As I said particularly, women, it is females who have had, unfortunately, children very young, say 15 or 16. So they were excluded, they hadn't finished their education, quite young women who have missed out because of the culture and the problems that are present in this area. But they are very bright young girls. And it is a shame to not have anything there to not give them that second route. That is where the access is so crucial.

The role access courses can play in offering learners a second chance can reportedly be pivotal, particularly in the context of female participants. Another access tutor (TF10) spoke of the impact of several generations of a family attending the same school and a child being labelled on the basis of their surname before they have even started at the institution. The tutor cited their experience of working in a drop-in centre in Merthyr Tydfil and certain young people not being given a chance:

There were some characters in there but the names over there were infamous. And you would come across this one child from a family of rogues and ne'er doers who was just adorable but who had not been given a chance because the ne'er do wells had overtaken everything. They have got a lot to answer for.

Eight of the tutors discussed aspects relating to generativity – the idea of improving the situation for the next generation, echoing the work of Withnall (2003) and Slater (2003). Several highlighted the strength of the community spirit evident in the local area. In the words of one tutor (TF5), “people have strong bonds with the local area and are keen to inject life and improve the lot of people generally”. The majority of tutors touched on the idea of parents becoming a role-model for their children, the

power of all working around the kitchen table together as a family of learners and the positive influence of reading books in the house.

When discussing working with the long-term unemployed in the South Wales Valleys tutor TF3 expressed:

There is this terrible, complete deflation of the balloon. Adult education, done in the right way, in some areas, can re-inflate the balloon. It is the only thing that can. What else can do it? What else can you build? You can't force companies to build there. You can force people to say they want more. People power is the biggest power. I love seeing people get better from the inside out.

This quote encapsulates the tutor's passion for adult education juxtaposed with the challenges facing the region and the key role education can potentially play in regenerating the lives of individuals as well as communities.

Funding constraints:

In relation to funding constraints, a number of seemingly disparate issues were raised. They mirror wider concerns evident in lifelong learning literature and in the adult education policy scene more generally.

One non-access tutor (TF4) spoke of wishing to offer her students some level 5 courses once they had exhausted their options at level 4 but confirmed the funding is not available for that provision. She expressed concern that the imposition of such constraints renders the notion of lifelong learning a contradiction in terms. This seems particularly prescient when considered in light of Schuller and Watson's (2009) four-stage categorisation of lifelong learning from cradle to grave.

Another non-access tutor (TF6) spoke about the impact of funding reductions on increased class sizes. She expressed concern that some of the learners she supports are vulnerable and if they were to undertake a course and "disappear" (in her words), they would never return again:

Before it might have been ok to work with five in a group, it is kind of not ok now and we should be working with 10 in a group. But as our student demographic hasn't changed, how do we manage that?

Doubling the number of people and halving the tutor support. How do you rationalise that? It just becomes so diluted.

Another tutor (TF2) reported that when they had more European funding available they were able to do more first steps learning but since then the funding has not been available to facilitate it. An additional tutor (TF3) reiterated that course provision is heavily restricted by funding. She reported that previously her organisation could ask people what courses they wanted to do and they could provide them but this is no longer possible. In her view putting on courses that captured the imagination of learners was imperative. She proposed:

There is a great deal of intuition there. You have to be really intuitive. What is going to turn these people on? And if you don't get that right then you might as well pack up, leave and go and get yourself a Chinese takeaway because you are going to fail.

The same tutor argued that with some statutory courses she delivers she is constrained by the curriculum and the associated funding mechanisms. The following quotation highlights the depth of the issue:

You talk to some people in these classes and you think wow, you just don't know what to do with the intelligence you've got do you? They just haven't got a clue. They have got it in spades but some of them are quietly highly intelligent, they just don't know what to do with it. Some suit somewhere has decided this is a good idea. Some of the younger people are just so angry. Just another course I am being sent on. Another this. This apathy, this general sense that nobody has ever shown them any respect or general direction. That goes further back then and you have to go back and ask is school right for everyone? Not the way, shape it is no.

This quotation, relating to some local unemployed individuals who are required to undertake statutory courses, is topical on many levels including the innate intelligence of these learners, their lack of direction and their sense of having been let down by the system. These findings resonate strongly with the Danish work of Illeris (2003, 2006).

One access tutor (TF10) reported conflict between statutory organisations and access provision with the statutory bodies allegedly not recognising access as a positive route back into work. She reported that in her experience the Job Centre makes it as challenging as possible for access students by changing times of appointments at the

Job Centre to inconvenience students and to, in her words, “make it as difficult as they can for them”.

Although it is not known whether this reported practice represents an isolated incident or a more widely occurring pernicious issue, it nevertheless highlights the tensions evident historically between liberal and vocational education and training and the current policy thrust towards workforce development.

Assessment on entry:

Assessment of students on application/entry to a programme was raised as a contentious issue within adult education by tutors and represents one with a potentially strong impact on adult reengagement. Four of the non-access tutors expressed strong views against the idea of assessing applicants on entry. One in particular (TF7) described herself as being “vehemently against testing”. These tutors also expressed concern over teaching study skills as this can be a significant turn-off for the students. These views were starkly contrasted with the findings from the access tutors, all of whom conduct rigorous screening to assess literacy and numeracy levels before accepting students onto their programmes. This is likely to be attributable to the purpose of the access course and the trajectory of engaging in degree level study that it aspires towards. The non-access tutors were mainly teaching on one-off, stand-alone courses where the same distinct expectations about progression were not held.

One of the access tutors (TF9) detailed one of the reasons they restructured their provision and introduced entry requirements was to remove the applicants who were operating at an extremely low level of literacy and numeracy, a long-standing challenge within the local region. By introducing assessment tests at the point of application they are able to identify the weaker students who would find it more challenging to complete the course. In her words:

What we have done is taken away the really low levels. Everybody now has to do a formal interview with the course tutor and they have to go through a screening. Basically they go onto a computer and do an initial assessment to get to a sort of level. They do that in both literacy and numeracy and the requirement is to have at least a level 2 in literacy and at

least a level 1 in numeracy. Some of the figures are dire. It is a real struggle to get to level 1. A lot of them won't pass the entry.

The same access tutor explained the significant deficit in basic skills and how the access course focuses heavily on addressing those skills shortages:

...we work very hard in this college to try and upskill them in their literacy and their numeracy. So we give them an awful lot of study skills, by that is basic skills really. How do you construct a paragraph, punctuation, spelling, grammar. How to structure, how to reference how to go away and do a piece of research, how to avoid plagiarism by putting things in your own words. That is essentially a level 2, level 3 skill. These learners are at level 1 so there is a lot of teaching needed to do that.

The same tutor explained in more detail their rationale for assessing on application and articulated that it has the best interest of the students at heart. She said:

We screen because if we don't, we are setting them up to fail otherwise. Even if we support them through the access and they get that diploma, when they go to university they are the ones that have dropped out. So we do operate very much with integrity at this college. We have worked very hard here because to be honest [access] was at risk here at the college. The numbers we had to enrol and the aspirations in this area because of the skills. Retention was abysmal and they wouldn't achieve. This way we are giving, we take a look at their full potential but we are very realistic about what they can achieve. We don't turn anybody away from the college, there are other courses they can do. So build their skills and I tell them, 'you can come back next year. Re-apply. If you have brought those skills up and you meet the criteria', then some learners do that.

Expressing concern about giving false hope the tutor stated:

It is a full-time course so a lot of them give up the work they have got. If they have got to, even some of the men give up work to come here full-time, it is a year of their life. I don't want to waste that year. I want them to be as ready as they can because they have got another 3 years of study.

When asked about how the applicants react to the screening, they responded unanimously that the experience is terrifying for the students. They reported instances of students crying, being paralysed with fear, being physically sick and just not turning up on the day. The different colleges operate varying approaches to the assessment. At one college the assessment is undertaken through the campus office and at another the course tutors are involved with the screening and conducting

interviews. They all expressed the sentiment that the assessment is done with the utmost sensitivity and they manage rejection extremely carefully, usually trying to signpost students to other opportunities within the particular college.

One of the tutors (TM5) explained that it is important they accept students carefully as there are a finite number of places to fill. As the access course is so intensive over 34 teaching weeks it is not possible to admit students to the programme once teaching has commenced. As a result, if a student withdraws, no students who were originally turned away can be invited back to fill the empty place and therefore it is wasted for the duration of that academic year.

Access courses:

Reflecting specifically on access courses, the access tutors made a number of observations about their students and recent changes to access course policy.

One tutor (TF9) stressed the impact of their course restructuring to include pre-entry assessment on application and the resulting impact on attainment:

We have restructured in the last couple of years and are far more prescriptive in who we take on to the course. Traditionally access has always been open door. If you turn up and you want to study, we would take anybody. But we are finding that retention was abysmal, achievement wasn't very good. Not many, not a great percentage were getting into university. So we have restructured and have good quality provision, over 90% of our learners get university places. The destination data on where they are in a couple of years, most of them complete their degree courses and the universities are showing that those access students who get on to university courses and stay on to do their degree, a higher number of them pass than your average student. So it is a very good programme, it works very well to structure it and be far more restrictive on who we take on. So that is why our provision has become quite a lot smaller really. Much more focused.

While the impact of introducing such measures may result in the exclusion of some possible applicants, it would be potentially difficult and highly unethical to allow students to progress and potentially incur debt when they are unable to operate at the required academic level. Nevertheless the prospect of assessment on application may prove a deterrent for some adults contemplating educational reengagement.

In addition to emphasising the importance of being selective on application in order to maximise the chances of students completing the course, the same tutor outlined how they have closed down their part-time provision for access students. Reportedly part-time students are more likely to drop out due to commitments outside of college and as a result the college now only offers full-time provision and this is associated with a higher completion rate. Although the rationale for this seems clear, especially in the context of needing to meet institutional targets and secure certain completion and progression rates, this nevertheless feels counter to the ethos associated with second-chance education and in recognition of the demographics typically associated with mature learners that constitute so much of this category of participants (Blanden and Machin, 2004).

All of the access tutors expressed what an intensive course the access programme is. They explained the extent of material that needs to be covered in the space of 34 teaching weeks. A particular challenge is reportedly developing the mathematical skills among students, especially when they are going to require mathematical abilities to enable them to complete nursing degrees. One access tutor (TM5) stated:

Our maths tutors are second to none. They have to get them from the equivalent of a 10 or 11 year old up to a GCSE grade C. And they have to do that over 34 weeks really.

Another access tutor (TF10) argued:

I think there is a thought from people who don't know what access is that it is a walk in the park. It isn't. It certainly isn't. It is a tough course, particularly with the newly added pressure of grading.

One access tutor (TF9) expressed concern about the new classification system for achievement in each component of the access course. She conceded that while the awarding of merit and distinction classifications does help to distinguish the students in terms of their academic achievement, higher education institutions are now raising the entry requirements for what they will accept.

HEIs are now asking, they are becoming more prescriptive for nursing, they have to have 6 distinctions in these subjects and so many passes. One admissions tutor wanted all 60 credits at distinction. So if you are

putting the hurdles up that high, bearing in mind what I said about where the students are starting from, that is unachievable.

The same tutor confirmed that many of the students are “bright” but they lack some of the skills required to engage in the academic work to the expected level:

These people know, they have lived lives and they are mature. They understand the concepts. There are lights going on, it is making sense to them. It is those skills to get a level 3 at distinction, to do that essay though, comparison, synthesis,... They don't have those skills. They will have them, if we had the time to teach them.

This tutor also emphasised concern about grade inflation as a response to the increased demands from higher education institutions:

I am afraid that perhaps what will happen then is that this diploma will become inflated. These learners will think they are better than they are, just like we have GCSE learners who come in here and say I have got 11 GCSEs at grade F and they feel like they have achieved. GCSE grade F is the equivalent of a 10 year-old child. Well it is just at the bottom of a level 1. But it is a GCSE.

One tutor (TF10) cited evidence from destination data that access students are more likely to complete degree level courses and to achieve firsts than young students who enter directly from compulsory schooling. Findings from the Access to Higher Education Report (QAA, 2013) seem to contradict this however.

Another tutor (TM4) highlighted their access course retention rates. They report the retention rate in England is in the mid-50s while the retention rate at their institution is 70%, significantly higher than the average. Access to Higher Education (QAA, 2013) data report the retention rate for access courses during the academic year 2011/12 as 67%, somewhat higher than the tutor's estimation.

5.3 Constraining and enabling forces

Under the broad umbrella of constraining and enabling forces, tutors spoke of a number of elements that can both benefit and hinder students on their individual learner journeys and these include: support around the learner; barriers; recruitment and development workers; and cohort/pedagogy. Swain and Hammond (2011)

employ the language of constraining and enabling forces in their research however the factors they articulate in this context are somewhat less structural and institutional and instead include circumstances pertaining more personally to learners such as the impact of poor health and having dependent children.

Support around the learner:

The majority of tutors mentioned crèches and highlighted the important role they play in allowing mothers to return to education. Three tutors highlighted that in addition to childcare provision, additional support is offered to learners in the form of taxis, free shuttle buses and fee waivers for those students on benefits. One tutor, TF2, highlighted, “a crucial part of engagement is the bits around the learners”. This tutor made particular reference to the provision of a crèche and transport links and termed such facilities as wrap-around.

In relation to the fee waivers, TF7 commented:

It would be foolish to not assume the idea that for a lot of people these courses are free is not an incentive because I think it most certainly is.

The enabling power of such support and benefits are well documented in the adult education literature (Caffarella, 2002; Cranton, 1994; McGivney, 1996).

Barriers:

All of the tutors made reference to the potential barriers facing learners, much of which echoes the literature outlined in section 2.5 to include situational, institutional, dispositional and the more recently added socio-cultural barriers (Blair *et al.*, 1995). Given the predominance of female students undertaking access courses as identified in the Access to Higher Education Report (QAA, 2013) and mirrored in section 5.6, the number of mothers undertaking courses means a lack of childcare represents a significant potential barrier for the target learner population in this study. There existed a general sense among respondents that the barriers facing (potential) learners are well documented in the adult education literature. The challenge remains how to overcome them. The following quotation from tutor TF3 encapsulates this:

We all know what the barriers are – it has been done to death - crèche, low expectations, transport. You know I did them all when I was on my degree. But there is so little work done on them.

Recruitment and Development Workers:

When discussing with tutors how students had heard about the various courses that were available, a number of themes emerged. In the non-access course context, the role of the development worker in recruiting a cohort of students, negotiating a curriculum and setting up requisite courses was reported as crucial. One tutor (TF6) who also undertakes development work explained a key aspect of the role is to make regular appearances in the local community to build a rapport and a sense of trust to encourage participation. She stated specifically:

The day of a development worker is quite ‘pick and mix-y’. Over the summer for instance, we take part in open days, community fetes, just generally trying to be involved in our allocated communities for instance. I work with Women’s Aid and Mind. You just try and get in as much on a social level as on a kind of professional level if you like. Accessing the local community cafes when you know you have got half an hour to just drop in and talk. Just getting your face around and being part of the background scene. So it can be quite a drip-drip effect. People might get to know you and one year you might have a few students come to a course and the next year there would be nothing but you keep plugging away at the events that go on in those areas so people kind of feel familiar with you and they might dip their toe in and say maybe I will, maybe I won’t. But if you have people saying no for a couple of years and then they actually do. Then it is kind of... are they so used to seeing you around they feel they trust you enough to be part of it or does it just coincide with the kids say being in school and they are ready to do something now. I think it is probably a marriage of the two. Is it just timing? Or is it more emotional or personal?

The latter lines of this quotation about timing and the merging of circumstances and influences are directly relevant to the unpicking of catalysts and triggers and are central to this investigation.

Reinforcing the importance of development work, one tutor (TF8) noted that not all students self-present and as a consequence the development work undertaken is fundamental:

I would say typically, students wouldn't necessarily self-present to university. So our work out in the communities is kind of an inroad if you like to a university experience.

Another non-access tutor (TF2) who used to work in further education (FE) explained that when she worked in a college, the 16-19 year old learners used to approach the campus and apply whereas in community-based adult education there is much more emphasis on, in her words, "taking the learning to the learners". She explained, "We don't have an FE drive for them to walk down. We go to the community". As such she emphasised that the development worker plays a key role in both recruiting and supporting the various learner groups.

The same tutor explained about a recent recruitment innovation that her organisation has been involved with – Community Learning Champions (NIACE, 2011). These representatives are volunteers from the local community who aim to encourage other local members of the community to take part in learning activities. They attend an accredited course, set their own goals for recruitment targets and then act voluntarily as advocates for local community learning provision. In the words of the tutor:

[The community learning champions] can go back and do as little or as much as they want with it. They set their own goals for it. Some, when I went to a celebration event of theirs there was a learning rep there who said my target this year is to get the woman opposite and three doors down who lost her husband to get her to a class this year. That is my target. And then you have got another person who is standing there, her eyes are lighting up by the idea of the numbers she got to go along with her. So she will be going along to a course and she will just be asking a few neighbours, do you want to come along with me. Or do you want to come along and see what you could sign up for? They are people who live in the community, who are taking people from their community, in a completely voluntary way. (TF2).

In a similar vein to the thrust behind community learning champions, the access tutors all spoke of the power of word of mouth recruitment. One access tutor (TF9) spoke of the dual approach to recruitment – the more traditional marketing-based and word of mouth:

Obviously the courses are on our webpage and they are in the prospectus. We advertise in the park in the summer when there are events. We send our little caravan down. But by and large our student groups come from word of mouth. It is people who go and tell people and every year I think about 80 or 90% of the learners who I interview,

who come through that door say ‘my friend was on this, my cousin has done this’. Because by and large we get very, very positive feedback about this and they say things like ‘it was life changing, it has changed my life. I didn’t know I could do this, I didn’t know this existed’.

The idea of the transformational power participation can incite links directly with the concept of regeneration conceptualised by Walters (2000). A second access tutor (TF10) also reiterated the idea of two approaches to recruitment. Again the more traditional and then her own targeted version of word of mouth recruitment:

It is two strands. The careers service over the last few years have been sending them up to us but roundabout, what I do on this campus, March/May time, I hold a coffee morning and every student that I have got I ask to bring at least one if not two people with them who they think would benefit from the access course. And that has been quite successful where people come in and they have got a chance to meet us and a chance to see the college in a non-threatening way. And that has been quite successful. But the thing that I think is our best advertisement is the students themselves. If they have had a good experience they will go off and tell other people about it. The word of mouth is priceless without question.

Cohort/pedagogy:

The majority of tutors expressed a view that the bonds that develop amongst a cohort of adult learners are very strong and consequently these connections can serve to keep students engaged and attending a course. The majority of tutors explained that they feel learning is enhanced by students supporting one another and that the learning experience is enriched by the breadth of experience and the diversity of backgrounds that students bring with them. One access tutor (TF10) expressly stated that a key reason access students succeed is the support they receive from other course members:

These students have come into us and because of the mixed nature of access they have settled in and succeeded in a way that they didn’t on A-levels. This is absolutely due to the support of the other members of the cohort. Because you have got like-minded people in the group who are here to do one thing and that is to gain the access diploma to move on. I think that influence on them shouldn’t be underestimated. There is a maturity about them.

Another tutor (TM2) emphasised the genuine sense of concern amongst a cohort and the pleasure other students take in their peers thriving:

I think the students tend to care about each other as well. They are really chuffed when other people do well and they are really supportive and things. It is really nice. It is a nice environment to work in.

A number of tutors spoke of students continuing to meet once a course is finished due to the lasting bonds that have been established. One tutor (TF5) specialising in English and creative writing reported that one of her former students is responsible for arranging local open microphone sessions to showcase talent and putting on 'poems and pints' evenings. This former student invites participation from a number of other students and additionally encourages other students to get involved in writing for community magazines.

Crossan *et al.* (2003, p. 60) report findings about the importance of relationships with fellow students and the course tutor. Their work also highlights the bonds formed between female students in particular, a topical finding given the predominance of female participants within this study.

From a pedagogic perspective, all of the tutors reported on the imperative of respecting individual learners and their own journeys. In the words of one tutor (TF5):

It is very important when people come back into education, you have to kind of acknowledge that this is their background and that health may have been an issue. Also to give them encouragement to drive them forward to not see themselves perhaps as victims, but to harness energies. With our people who have lead full-ish lives, they have had up and downs, they have had different jobs, they may have had a family and then a second family. All sorts of complications and trajectories. You know when you are teaching 16-19 there will be vulnerable people in that group but in some ways, I suppose you can make an assumption that a lot of their experiences are shared ones. There are certain activities and interest that they are all going to have.

Additionally the idea of mutuality emerged whereby a teaching experience is fulfilling for the tutor as well as the student in an environment of mutual respect and ideas sharing.

In terms of pedagogic approaches to facilitating student learning, a number of the tutors spoke of running a significant amount of group-work exercises to get students talking to one another. This interaction between small groups reportedly helps to put students at ease. The majority of tutors also described getting students to deliver presentations to their peers as an important vehicle to ultimately develop confidence. The challenge of the development and assessment of confidence through the use of presentation is an oft-cited approach in the employability literature and an element of pedagogy that stimulates much debate (Maher and Graves, 2008). In addition, introducing group work into the classroom, especially if there are difficult group dynamics, requires careful management and planning (Hansen, 2006).

Several non-access tutors spoke of the concept of a negotiated curriculum. The idea of learning participants stipulating the topics they would like to cover and the range of courses available reportedly plays a key role in helping to stimulate and maintain interest.

When discussing her approach to teaching, one tutor (TF7) emphasised that it is imperative that students are made to feel comfortable in the classroom as if they do not, they will not return. The majority of the non-access tutors emphasised the importance of small class sizes and working on a more individual basis with students. One tutor (TM2) contrasted the difference between typical undergraduate education whereby a lecturer may address a class of over a hundred students against their own model of provision where students require and benefit from significantly more one-on-one support. Another tutor (TF6) expressed concern that students can disappear in large groups or worse, be put off from ever attending and therefore small, unthreatening groups sizes are fundamental to effective provision:

We work on the premise that we work with small numbers to give support and obviously then there is a massive conflict about bums on seats. But we still fight for our cause. Some students that we can see on that wall would disappear in a class of 20. Totally disappear. Well in fact they wouldn't get there. They wouldn't get there because they wouldn't have thought they could. It is the grass roots development work that kind of opens up the road for people to do it. I don't like to sound too wishy-washy that 'oh we are fighting for the cause' but I do believe in it. Even if 10 people a year go on to do something then it is better than none... Some of these people are vulnerable and if they did come in and disappear that would be it forever. (TF6).

A key pedagogic challenge echoed by many of the tutors pertains to supporting the learners, many of whom have fragile learning identities, and designing courses accordingly:

So the vast, vast majority of our learners would be categorised as non-traditional learners, who have little or no or poor either experiences of education per se or of engaging at a higher level. So along with that comes, in a pragmatic way, the need for people to have support and study skills. But I think we also have to be very, very conscious of peoples' prior experiences in our teaching and learning strategies. In that they are very much, they are well-considered approaches that will help to keep people engaged on a weekly level. Because people don't come to courses 2 days a week, they come for 2 hours a week and so it is quite a challenge. We need to keep people coming back each week. We do encourage people to submit for assessment. So there is a high degree of application to real-life experiences, a high level of ongoing formative assessment, which is helpful for building confidence. If all you have is scary summative assessment at the end you scare people away and you will never see them again. (TF7).

On the subject of fear surrounding assessment, one of the access tutors (TF10) spoke of how carefully they have to employ their language around the subject of assessed work as it can set up significant barriers for students:

I have tried different descriptions about tests. 'We are going to have, I am going to give you some work and we are going to take it in and see how far you have travelled'. 'So it is a test then?' 'No, no, no not a test'. It is really funny. Whichever language or descriptor that you use, it is a test. It is that test hurdle for them. It makes no difference to them how you phrase it. It is more to do with them being adults than them being students.

The majority of the non-access tutors reported that many of their students like receiving recognition through accreditation however, raising the dilemma of disliking assessment but nevertheless enjoying reward.

One tutor (TF7) explained that despite her institution's strong track record of helping students to thrive, a few will still find the notion and process of being assessed too daunting:

What we do have, because despite all the fantastic support that we say that we offer in terms of study skills and formative assessment and the

like, we still have some people who, for whom the idea of summative assessment is too overwhelming.

A particular pedagogic challenge reported specifically by the access tutors pertains to mathematics education as it is a requirement that students achieve a certain level of mathematical attainment. One access tutor (TF9) reported that their maths tutors work hard to take the fear out of the subject and teach it in a different way to how the subject would have been approached in school, often making it highly contextual to mathematical problems in nursing for example for those students planning to pursue nursing qualifications.

5.4 Tutor empathy and awareness of student fear

Building on the importance of cohort support and carefully designed pedagogy and reflecting on the findings of Crossan *et al.* (2003) about the pivotal influence tutors hold, the role of the tutor emerges as a powerful dimension of adult participation.

Tutor empathy and awareness of student fear:

All of the tutors expressed empathy for their students in terms of the fear they can feel and the majority expressed recognition of the fear they had felt themselves as adult returners to learning.

One non-access tutor (TF4) commented that the anticipatory fear of engaging in a new activity could in fact be worse than the actual reality:

Very often the fear of doing something is worse than actually doing it. I have been in that position myself you know, thinking I can't do that but when you do it, you think that wasn't so bad. What is the worst that can happen?

Another non-access tutor (TF7) explained how assessment activities are carefully structured and explained to avoid frightening students. She described that students have a (misplaced) fear of being discovered that they do not actually belong in an institution of learning, a sentiment she herself could relate to:

So within classes there will be small research exercises or small opportunities to understand referencing or developing an argument. Because we know that if we said oh yes you can come on this course, creative writing, but you have to do these study skills modules, people see it as a test. 'That is it, they are going to find out I am a fraud, they are going to find out I can't write, I can't do this' and so we never see them again. Certainly when I started teaching I was terrified of somebody walking through the door and saying 'what do you think you are doing there'. And if you think about it we were qualified to do that, whereas a lot of our students aren't at all. They are just waiting to be found out for a fraud. 'Who am I to be doing a university level course?' (TF7).

Another tutor (TM2) reported on students' fear of failure and how students regularly make excuses for failure even before their work has been submitted for assessment. This particular tutor described this as a coping mechanism of self-defence that he could relate to. A further tutor (TF8) cited examples of students who engaged well with a course throughout a term but when it came to the assessment at the end were too frightened to submit any coursework. Their particular institution offered an alternative to such students who could be put forward for the five-credit award of a module entitled 'Engaging with Higher Education' at the discretion of a tutor. The module award draws on a collection of their formative assessments and contributions to tutorial sessions.

While these opportunities to support students and encourage them through assessment activities are invaluable within wider adult education, there nevertheless remains a powerful need within access provision to prepare learners for the rigour of study at higher education level and this could potentially include unseen examinations in a university context, no matter how intimidating students find them. Failure to prepare students accordingly in fact potentially acts a disservice to them in the longer term. An observation alluded to by all of the access tutors.

A number of tutors demonstrate their sense of vocation for adult education and their depth of feeling towards the adult learners they encounter. One tutor (TF6) opened up about her own background and her passion for learning:

The best laid plan even can get scuppered at every level. Sometimes it is better to be flexible. A plan can be so rigid, I think that is something I did as a young person myself. I had a plan, I lived in a Communities First area, I wanted to get better, I wanted to do better. No snobbery

whatsoever, I just saw education as my out-road of my environment. I still am happy to be in that environment but knowing that I am making an informed choice. So I saw university, I need to go to university and I need to not be here. I don't even use my subject that I first studied, it was just that learning thing. You just need to get to a certain place to realise that there is the potential. I did my first degree and it is just a piece of paper now... If I don't learn something new everyday I am disappointed. I just wish you could bottle it and give it to a baby as a jab when they are born. Here, jab, I like learning.

The idea of inoculating babies with a love of learning at birth creates a powerful image and embodiment of this particular tutor's passion for education as well as an awareness of education having the potential to transform horizons.

In emphasising the crucial role that tutors play in supporting the experience of the learner, one tutor (TM3) simply stated, "The key to everything is the tutors you have".

In reflecting on her own learning journey and path to becoming an adult education tutor, one individual (TF3) explained that the main trigger had been her husband being made redundant. This event reportedly led her to undertake an IT qualification and begin teaching and in her words:

Once that door opened for me I absolutely loved it!! I adored my students, I found skills inside me I never knew I had. Attitudes I didn't know I had. Ditto motivation that I thought had escaped me for the rest of my life. I hadn't gone on to university straight after school or anything like this. It was not me at all. I left school as fast as I could. I had had negative experiences at school and whatever. So all of a sudden these students are coming to me and I have enormous empathy with what they are trying to do. And when they come in about wanting to go on a course and asking what that might do for them in the future, my mind is going a hundred miles an hour thinking well look what it did for me walking back into the classroom.

This particular tutor overcame negative experiences of schooling and engaged with adult learning and subsequent teaching opportunities resulting in a significant level of personal transformation. She expressed a view that her own experience, particularly the fear she felt on the first day, helps her to relate to students who may be experiencing similar emotions:

Now I sat in my car for nearly 2 hours before enrolling [on that IT course] because I was sure I couldn't go in. And that is true. I thought the

others would be taller than me, be smarter than me and have more to say than me. In the end I thought I have got to do it. This is ridiculous. So in the end I walked in and it did change my life. Anybody who says anything like this to me, I can see the potential.

The same tutor communicated a view that the moment has to be right for somebody to engage and that she is able to relate to all of the emotions an adult returner may be experiencing:

I had to change before I could dare to change my view of the world. Once I had done that, doors opened for me and tumbled down. And now, I can never say I could go back and do a years course. I wasn't ready for it. I wasn't ready. And this is the point when I am with my students. If they come into me in their teens, 20s, 30s, 40s, 50s, 60s, 70s, whenever – the moment is right for them. I think about that fear when they walk in. I know about their fears because I had them in bucket loads and I continue to have them now. Now I have to put it at the back of my mind and think enough is enough. I am who I am now. I know I am very good at what I do.

The notion of the 'correct moment' for reengagement within a lifespan as interpreted by the learner is central to this catalysts and triggers investigation. This tutor additionally spoke positively of the power and joy involved with watching learners transform:

You know people get jobs, papers come onto your desk and leave the other side. But if you see someone walk out of your class with a twinkle in their eye, that moment where they change. Where they change to, 'I think I can or I think I might be able to', those, I hear, a lot of people keep my number. And you know they have gone on to do these different things. And secretly I think to myself I was there at the beginning and it is such a privilege. It is the most privileged work that I could actually ever imagine myself being involved in. To actually be involved in changing a life... Good god! I do keep in touch with a lot of my students. I have two mobile phones, one for my students. If I didn't believe in this person, who the hell is gonna?

The majority of the respondents expressed a passion for adult education. Some described it more as a calling than a job, others reflected on their own learner journeys and said they would not be the tutor they are today if they had begun this work much earlier in life and others spoke of never entering a classroom with lofty ideas as it is a guaranteed way to disengage students and lose them forever.

One tutor (TF2) spoke of the transformative effect tutoring had on them as an individual. In her words:

You cannot put both feet into these waters without seeing your toenail polish come off. You just can't. Or you are not human.

Two of the access tutors expressed the emotion associated with their roles. One (TF9) commented on how difficult it is to turn students away now they have started screening applicants:

It has been tough because I don't like turning anybody away. And somebody may be there begging me for a chance but then their skill level is sort of entry level and then I am not doing them any favours at all.

Another access tutor (TF10) reflected of the great empathy she feels for the challenges facing adult learners, noting specifically her own personal experiences and how difficult it can be for students to find themselves in a submissive capacity:

Adult returners. I think it is because they are on top of their game in the world outside and they come back into us and they have to start from base level again. Because that is what I did. I went back to university when I was 45. So, I have walked their walk. I know the courage that it takes and I have got great empathy with them because of that. It is a big thing when you are the prime mover and shaker within your family, making all the decisions and then suddenly you come to college and there are other people making the decisions on your behalf and they are making value judgements as well. And that is a difficult thing for them to get used to I think.

As the above quotation illustrates, reengagement can be a challenging and unsettling journey for students and the demonstration of tutor understanding of this is important.

5.5 The transformative power of education

Borrowing the language of Mezirow (1978, 1997), the notion of learning being transformational emerged as a key theme from the perspectives of the adult education tutors. The following quotation from Russell's (1980) *Educating Rita* richly encapsulates the notion of transforming from within. In the words of the main female character, adult returner Rita, when discussing the impact of participation:

That is why they come to the hairdressers – because they want to be changed but if you wanna change: y’ have to do it from the inside don’t y’? (Educating Rita).

Transformative power:

The majority of the tutors spoke of witnessing a transformation in their students. The following multifaceted quote from a non-access tutor (TF3) begins by explaining how a short course can inspire subsequent degree study and make people feel better about themselves and how it is possible to pinpoint that exact moment in a person’s learning career:

There are those people who in a 10-week or a 12-week course in say psychology for arguments sake, they love it and they start answering back. To get them, you have got to keep them. Get them interested in what they want to hear. Then they will just go away and have more of a respect for themselves and their life. Maybe have a bit more of an idea of what is the better path to go down. That is their destiny. That 12-week course can send people on to a degree. It is extraordinary. In five years time they may go and do something else but it started in that moment where this burn was going on inside them where they had the nerve to try and it and then they can sort of think, ‘hang on a minute’. Not being so happy that their boyfriend treats them like hell. That kind of thing. Just feeling a little bit better about themselves. I think that is one of the most beautiful parts of adult education but unfortunately it doesn’t pull in funding. They go in their evaluation form: tutor was great, resources were great and maybe I’ll do another course. That is meaningless. You wanna watch the text messages 6 months later or watch them on Facebook. You start seeing their language change, even their statuses on Facebook will start changing and you realise you know what, they’re changing.

The same tutor spoke of the power adult education can harness. In her view it has the potential to change an individual’s whole perspective on the world. She cited examples of students who are no longer content to “go out and get pissed” and who instead start to accuse their friends of wasting their lives when just a few months before their mindset changed they too would spend their time drinking and socialising. Building on this idea of a transformed view of the world, the tutor reflected on the positive impact this can have in turn on the lives of that learner’s children and once again how powerful and far-reaching this impact can be.

Another tutor (TF6) explained that the previous week they had been in Merthyr Tydfil and seen two groups of students in two separate rooms. One room contained a group of new students about to start a course and the other housed more experienced students. In their words:

It was fascinating because you could look in one room and they were all small and timid and you looked in the other room and they had come alive. It is remarkable the change that takes place.

One of the access tutors (TF10) spoke of the joy of watching her students flourish in their use of language as their vocabulary expands. She described encouraging them to keep a dictionary on their desk and to look up any words they do not understand. In her experience:

As the course goes on you can see that linguistically they are developing and their vocabulary is expanding. And suddenly you realise that this is a student who is using a word that they would never have used when they first came on the course. And that is a joy in itself when they have been checking the odd word, some of the words you think how daft are they not to know that but not being able to show that to them, that being able to articulate in a way that they couldn't before.

In addition to speaking of the positive outcomes of access, all of the access tutors reported on personal relationship breakdowns that can ensue with partners with every new cohort of access students as a result of the transformation evident in female participants.

One access tutor (TF9) stated:

On the flip side of that of course there are problems within relationships as well because of the culture of the Welsh Valleys. The students are really engaging and then going home, they are becoming different women. They become more confident and self-esteem is going up. They come to me and say things like 'I was having this conversation with my husband last night'. And sometimes the husbands do not like that from their partners. Quite frequently we get people dropping off the course and it is pressure from the partner burning books, saying no, you're not going there any more. What are they teaching you in that college? It is a bit like Educating Rita – have you ever seen that film? That is how I see our access course and that happens. We used to have a deputy principal here who used to go in and give a talk every year to the access students and welcome them. Because by and large our learners are young, they are 19, but these are probably the only mature group apart from our HE groups, and he would say be prepared for the hard work, be prepared to

be really enlightened and be prepared for divorce he would say because it happens every year. He said I would always have husbands ringing up saying what are you teaching my wife?

Another access tutor (TF10) echoed similar experiences of witnessing relationship breakdowns and once again likened this to being related to cultural dimensions of the South Wales Valleys:

It does end in divorce sometimes. Last year we had two separations on the access course. Both the women are now in university. I am convinced that there was an inherent flaw in it. It is, as much as you try and say to them look it is a form of control. What is happening to you is that you are burgeoning now and you are becoming this wonderful, opinionated woman, and I think it is a Valleys thing as well.

She also cited several extreme examples she had witnessed:

But if you have got a particularly demanding partner... the worst one ever was a partner who physically destroyed work belonging to a student and burned books belonging to the library here. That is the worst case. There have been beatings. One woman I had a few years ago was badly beaten by her husband. It was the people who were around her, on the access course, that convinced her that she should go to the police. And she had put up with it for 14 years. Such a positive effect as well. And for some of these women they have been isolated for so long. They come into a group and the cohort is very, very strong.

These tutors spoke passionately about the transformation they witnessed among their student population. Another tutor reflected on the extent to which the positive outcomes of participation can be perceived to outweigh potential adversity experienced during a programme of study. In her words:

People can swing back and forwards like with the situational factor i.e. relationship breakdowns, illness – things that were completely out of their control – they would have to say they felt worse at the end of the year of study but there is something in them that they feel better. A juxtaposition. Knowing that you feel better intrinsically but that there are things you can't control that are affecting your everyday life and making you feel depressed and withdrawn but you know that, you have done something of value. (TF6).

This idea of having ‘done something of value’ is central to the positive power of participation. In light of the transformative power educational participation possesses it is key to consider individual aspects of engagement.

5.6 Aspects of individual participation

A number of themes emerge under the broad umbrella of aspects of individual participation. These include: information about learner backgrounds; views on the reasons that students participate; aspiration about progression to higher education; catalysts and triggers; confidence and disbelief about ability; the encountering of mental health issues; and, reasons for non-completion of a course.

Learner backgrounds:

The majority of tutors reported that there are more female than male students undertaking courses that they teach on/run. In particular some tutors highlighted the diversity of the student body and the challenge in trying to generalise the student make-up. Several tutors suggested that every group is mixed in terms of age and occupational background and that this can shift according to the economic climate. One tutor specifically stated that the majority of students on the courses she delivers are mothers and this was a similar response for several other tutors. The importance of childcare provision to support mothers emerged in every interview with each tutor highlighting that it is crucial to facilitate access, linking strongly with the aforementioned barriers literature.

Reasons for taking part:

Much of the information shared about perceived learner reasons for participation reinforces the literature discussed in chapter 3 and resonates with elements of the synoptic table in section 3.2. Houle’s (1961) typology encapsulating goal-oriented learners, activity-oriented learners and learning-oriented learners also appears to have maintained its currency alongside the updated work of Blair *et al.* (1995). According to the diverse tutor perspectives, the social function of education cannot be overlooked alongside the possession of a love of learning.

Tutor TF4 who reported that the majority of her students are mothers describes them as “mums that have got some sort of goal whether that be going back into the workplace to gain, some new skills, new knowledge. To gain confidence as well.”

The non-access tutors reported some less vocationally orientated reasons for a proportion of their students engaging with their courses than the access tutors. This finding is commensurate with the literature in chapters 2 and 3 when the highly focused nature of access course provision is considered. One tutor cited an example of a student who came to class purely for the enjoyment of learning, another highlighted the social contact it gave their students and therefore the social function such education can play. A third tutor reported a proportion of older students who come out of interest for the subject rather than possessing the goal of achieving a degree or securing further employment.

A fourth tutor, TF6, echoed many of these sentiments as illustrated in the following quotation:

It is not even always to do with the actual subject matter, it is just the learning per se. It is just the learning experience. Because you could learn something about psychological theory but you have gained eight more friendships and you have widened your social network and learned the day to day of being on campus and knowing how to get around the university.

Reflecting retrospectively on reasons for taking part, a fifth tutor (TF3) noted the following from her experience:

Sometimes groups meet for five years and then the funding changes and says they have to demonstrate progression and then they say they don't want to. And then you realise that they are not there for the education, they are there for support or company and that can be as vital as to save a life. It is the most fascinating area because it is people.

Progression to HE – Aspirations:

In terms of student aspirations to progress to higher education, there is unsurprisingly a marked distinction between the responses cited by access course tutors and non-access course tutors. This is likely to be expected as access courses are designed specifically to provide an admissions pathway to higher education programmes. One access tutor, TM5, reported that all the students begin the course with the ambition of gaining access to university and they work hard as tutors throughout the course to prepare students for study at degree level. In explaining her approach to developing the students, tutor TF10 stated:

I never use the word *if* you go to university, I always say *when*. So very early on they realise this is the route that we want for them.

Another access tutor (TM5) explained that 90% of their learners go on to degree courses and the majority study nursing, psychology degrees or wish to become social workers. The tutor explained that the access course team are encouraged by both the percentage of students getting a place and the number of places being accepted by students. An additional positive outcome the access tutors reported is the locations where students are applying and being accepted. They reported that the most local institution to the college was previously the preferred option for students but more recently students have been applying to other higher education institutions in the South Wales area. Reasons for this are unknown and may potentially be associated with positive aspects such as increased levels of confidence across more recent cohorts or potentially an outcome of institutions raising their entry criteria following the introduction of classifications into access programmes. Nevertheless students are still seeking to remain situated within a relatively small corridor of South East Wales and as a consequence this echoes some of the findings of Hinton (2011). The access tutors perceived this wider spread of applications as a good outcome for two reasons. Firstly it is a reflection of students' confidence in order to apply slightly further away from their homes and secondly, it reflects well on the college's provision if these students are being accepted. Tutor TF9 stated:

We are affiliated with X University but now they are going further a field and they are being accepted further a field. So that is quite encouraging to us as a team here in the college in that you know they

are performing well at interview, they are performing well at gaining their qualifications and when they are getting there they are doing well and we are being seen more and more as a quality provider in that respect.

Several of the non-access tutors also reported accounts of their students progressing on to higher education. One (TF4) spoke of a lot of her students going onto campus in the autumn to begin degree courses and another (TF5) reflected back on former students having undertaken degree courses at the bachelors and masters level. A third tutor (TF6) categorised her students into two groups: “people who know they want to do something but they don’t know what” and “people who know their interests or the pathway they want to go to”. Both categories of learners had aspirations to undertake further study even if not to degree level.

Catalysts and Triggers:

Tutors shared a range of responses in relation to the broad theme of catalysts and triggers. All of the tutors acknowledged that every learner has their own unique history and no two stories are the same. In the words of tutor TF8:

I think there are lots of unknowns, I think that there are all these stereotypes and you have to really guard against assuming things about particular groups. Oh well, they come from that community so therefore... It is never like that. I am always amazed about the stories people tell me about where they have come from. You know, what they have done. It is always, always interesting and never predictable.

A minority of the non-access tutors reported interest in a particular subject as the main draw for initial engagement. One English tutor (TF5) noted that:

Quite often creative writing is the draw for those people who come in and say well I have always been interested in writing but I have been working on railways or I have been working on the steel works. It is really difficult.

Another tutor, TF7, cited research work undertaken by a colleague that emphasised subject interest as a key catalyst for engagement. As an aside it is worth noting that some interviewees adopted the language of the research study by employing the terminology of catalysts. In their words:

What gets people through the door, which is a very, very significant thing to put your foot over the door. But what he found is the catalyst for that is an interest in the subject area: say IT, psychology, creative writing.

Tutor TM6 further noted:

It all goes back to the idea that engagement, initial engagement, is on interest and not, 'oh well I think I am going to go to university'. You think, 'oh, they are doing internet genealogy in the community centre I think I might go and see what that is about'.

A proportion of the tutors made reference to illness acting as a trigger for engagement while others cited illness and caring responsibilities as present in learners' personal histories:

Certainly a lot of my students have had, I would say, have either experienced ill health themselves or have been caring for others. So, that can weigh heavily on people. And I suppose that perhaps coincides with the nature of the community, you know some of them are socially deprived areas, where ill health is a part and parcel of where they are living and so on. (TF5).

Sometimes people have had illness of some kind – you know – physical or mental and have just taken time out and then just felt that as part of their recovery they would like to return to education. (TM6).

Three of the tutors made explicit reference to mental health issues amongst their student population. One tutor (TM2) explained that their organisation undertakes partnership work with mental health agencies and consequently this has an influence on their learner demographic and the prevalence of mental health issues in their student body. A second tutor (TF5) who works in community-based education reported on her growing concern about students she teaches having mental health issues and how their behaviour can change throughout a course depending on the medication they are taking. A third tutor (TF3) reported on having taught a particular group of women who had used the mental health service. She explained the most significant challenge for these students is regular expected attendance and trying to stay for the duration of each session. In her words:

Their biggest barrier was getting there everyday and if they got there they may not stay all day. They got there and that is as massive an achievement as crossing any stage in a cap and gown.

It is impossible to speculate on whether the mental health issues of these learners are linked to wider issues of socio-economic deprivation within the local area. Positive links are widely reported however between improved mental health and educational participation (Hammond, 2004; Feinstein *et al.*, 2008).

Three of the tutors offered accounts of students who had recently relocated to the local area and were engaging in educational opportunities in order to help them assimilate in the community.

The majority of tutors cited reasons for participation as being either personal – for enjoyment – or professional – for advancement. Five of the tutors used the term ‘stepping stone’ to indicate how participation in one course could lead to engagement with another or subsequent employment progression. One of these tutors (TM2) distinguished a difference between first steps and stepping-stones proposing that although many learners do not think beyond a first step, that initial step frequently turns into a stepping-stone.

The socio-economic context of the local area emerged in every interview and to quote tutor TM2:

A lot of the people we are working with, they come from disadvantaged areas, you would say they perhaps suffer more disadvantage than others.

The majority of other tutors made reference to their students coming from Communities First areas, which goes hand-in-hand with regeneration work and the idea of boosting life chances.

The majority of tutors made reference to students having had a negative experience at school and the idea that people are now looking for a second chance.

One access tutor (TF10) made explicit reference to an increased incidence of bullying at school acting as a trigger to engage on the access course. In this situation bullying

reportedly resulted in withdrawal from school without A-levels or equivalent and the need to pursue an access qualification to gain subsequent entry to HE level programmes.

In terms of the interplay between catalysts and triggers, several tutors spoke of the timing being right, perhaps children being at school coinciding with seeing a flyer for a course. One tutor (TF6) posed the rhetorical question is the timing just right to foster participation or is the decision more deeply rooted in emotional aspects? This tutor speculated it was a convergence of the two.

A significant majority of tutors reported on students seeking to improve their own lives and the lives of their families:

You have got people who are looking literally in terms of employability. They are thinking 'I need to support my family, I need to better myself, I want my children to have more than I did or to live a better lifestyle'. (TF8).

This desire to improve the circumstances of their lives was linked directly to seeking to enhance employability skills according to a number of tutors.

Other specific reasons for student participation cited by tutors included a desire to act as a role model for children, unstable personable relationships, ageing parents and a sense of being unfulfilled.

In the words of tutor TF6, employing the language of the study:

There is so much emotional baggage attached to the catalysts.

In relation to a sense of being unfulfilled, tutor TF7 commented students often say:

'I have always wanted to but I never thought I could'. It is kind of one of those desires that lurks around in the back of someone's mind. When they have finished all the washing, the ironing, or you know they have finished a full day at work, because it is tricky as well at the moment with unemployment. Because if you are in a job, that's fine. But you might not be fulfilling your dream. Unfulfilled people are not happy people and it does not make for a good community. So that is another tricky situation. You could be working and be seen from the outside to have an OK life and then you are really but you are not doing what you really wanted to do and you are not happy.

Maybe you can't see any way of doing it and then part-time study is a really good way of doing it. That is why our courses run in the evening or in local communities. Because then if someone finishes a shift, they can kind of work around it.

A number of the tutors spoke of students articulating a certain feeling inside, demonstrating a sense that they wanted more. Tapping into this and providing opportunity for fulfilment was the key to the merger between catalysts and triggers in their view.

One tutor (TF3) powerfully explained at length:

These students, they have left education because education didn't suit them and they hated education, hated the way they were educated. They felt that they had more to offer the world than the education system, or another way to say it is that they had too much to say for themselves at school – they would leave, join the ranks of the single mother society, get pregnant at 16, 17, 18 and think this is it for them but then you have one person down there who stands up and starts to do a course. Now when that person does, there is a ripple effect. Especially the half of the Valleys where I am teaching at the moment, 'if she will go, I'll go'. And somewhere deep down inside there has to be the question that they are asking themselves, and the question must be something like, 'what exactly am I worth? What can I do? I am worth more, I know I am brighter than the school said I was. I know I can do it'. But they do not even hear that voice. It is an invisible, hidden little gremlin way in the back of their minds and they do not really necessarily hear it. And that can be why.

The idea of a desire inside wanting more that is awakened and then realised due to educational opportunity and provision epitomises the potential interplay of catalysts and triggers in this context.

In discussing the fragility of adult returners and the influence of others around the student, tutor TF3 powerfully described:

It is very fragile. It is like a butterfly wing. Absolutely like a butterfly wing. It can be destroyed. The worst thing that you can do is destroy somebody when they have had the nerve to try again, because it will be years later, before they try a third time. Then they will be waiting until they are middle aged, it really is that simple. So that is what I think it is for me, it is this seed of doubt inside that I can do more, and wanting more. But they have to see it around them that it is OK. Because the culture has a lot to do with it. If the culture around them is one thing,

that is what they will do. And it takes a brave person to stand up and say, 'you know what, what you are doing is no longer good enough for me. I am going to go and do that', because then you are stepping away from your peers, your family, your friends. I was the first person in my family to get a degree and some of these people who come into my classes, they are the first people who have gone into anything like that.

The same tutor reiterated the influence of others and linked it to the idea of the internal voice inside urging one on:

That nagging voice, that seed. They have got to see that and they have got to think that and then they have to see a poster for a course. And then they have got to say to a friend, 'do you fancy going, oh I dunno...' It has to be the right day and invariably there has to be childcare because invariably there are needs and issues. And then it is 'you know, let's go, try it out'. But that day is SO important. 3 or 4 things have got to happen. The spark has got to be lit but then they have to have the nerve to walk in.

In essence a significant amount has to converge to be right for an individual in the context of their own personal learner journey for reengagement to take place.

Building on the idea of this nagging voice, tutor TF3 commented that much of engagement is associated with taking the bold decision to participate:

The psychology of it is interesting really. It is finding the nerve. It really is. It boils down to that. Some of the people that come into my classes, they have got mouths on them the size of Wales, they are full of it. They can be aggressive, but I know, if I turn up early I hear it all but they are perfectly grown up when I am in the room. They will slip back into 'effing and blinding about this and god knows what. They do all that and yet they don't when they are with you. And they have got this big sort of personality, and yet they have got this big doubt. The psychology there is so fascinating to me. They can be so full of themselves and yet scared at the same time. How do you tap into that emptiness, make them realise how the balance is wrong? Sometimes the aggression and the noise that they make and you know the anti-social way in which they will sometimes behave is sometimes just a way of trying to get noticed. Because sometimes people will push you away and they want to see who cares enough to push back.

The idea of stimulating and prompting engagement is once again central to the concern of catalysts and triggers.

In terms of circumstances surrounding participation in the access course, one access tutor (TF9) explained:

It is typically women who are in their late 30s. They have had children young. They have been working in caring, banking and now they want to do something else because their children are in school and that is traditionally the group that we have got. They probably became disengaged at school, probably did GCSEs. Most of our learners come in with absolutely no qualifications.

The tutor further expanded to emphasise the key role that word of mouth recruitment plays and how this can coincide with a desire to achieve more:

Yes, it really is 80 or 90% word of mouth. Most of them, I think the majority of them have had young children, their children are going into school and now they want to do something. They want to work, a lot of these people have never engaged in work, their families, their parents, their grandparents haven't worked. The statistics show that a lot of the families don't have books at home. There is no value seen in education. Not in all of them, but a significant number of them. Some of them have been in dead-end jobs for years, those who want to do teacher training say, 'oh I did my GCSEs and I am working in the citizens advice bureau. I am bored. I want to do something, I want to get a degree, I want to learn, I want to go and teach'. Or, 'I have got my children in school and my little one has been struggling with reading. I have been helping out at the school and the teacher has said, look about further up-skilling then'. The students have decided that they want to be here.

Another access tutor (TF10) emphasised the convergence of circumstances:

I think for them it is the right time for them. I would love to say it is all the college and it is all us but I think it is about the right time for them as well.

In the context of catalysts and triggers from the tutors' personal perspective, two tutors spoke openly about their own experiences. One reported on overcoming their own personal challenges to result in a life-changing engagement with adult education:

I wholly believe in adult education because it changed my life. If it can change my life, somebody who came from a council estate, who was bullied in school, your classic barriers to learning. If it can change my life then it can change almost anybody's – if they want it. If they want it, not if it is being forced on them. (TF3).

The emphasis from this tutor is that somebody has to want to change, it is essentially a desire that must come from within rather than being forced by external agencies, further confirming the findings of Illeris (2003, 2006).

A second tutor (TF10) was able to articulate the exact trigger that prompted their return to education as an adult and paints an interesting picture of the recall that could take place in student interviews:

It is amazing how fate takes a hand in this as well. The reason I went back into education, I was earning good money with what I was doing, but I was told that this girl who didn't know where County Durham was, she thought it was in Ireland would be my boss. And when I queried and questioned it I was told 'she has got an HND'. So I thought, 'right'. That was my trigger. I rang the local college that day, I said what A-levels have you got running tonight which was a Monday and they said English and I said that will do. And I started. I was glad that they took me but that was my catalyst. Anger. I was spitting. I thought HND, I'll show you. I can articulate the absolute moment. I was a daughter in a family of brothers. Born in 1947. Education was, may god forgive them for saying this, wasted on a girl. My brothers were all in university and I left after 8 o-levels and went to work. And I don't think it ever leaves you. So some of these students here, had the ability to have gone on but perhaps school didn't suit them, the education system let them down, it could be all manner of things.

This investigation seeks to explore the impact of such influencing events on access course learners and the meaning attached to them in conjunction with the convergence that has resulted in the ensuing reengagement within this context.

Confidence and disbelief about ability:

The notion of confidence emerged in every interview. Seven tutors specifically mentioned the idea of watching students "come out of their shells" during the course of a programme. These tutors described students contributing more to class discussions with each passing week and the idea of seeing them become alive. One access tutor (TF10) remarked, "you can tangibly watch confidence growing". Another non-access tutor (TF3) described how students often stop and say to her, "hang on a minute, I am not so thick" when they begin to realise their capabilities. This creates an interesting parallel with the work of Feinstein *et al.* (2007) and Swain and Hammond

(2011) who cite proving to oneself as a newly emerging category for returning to learning.

Another non-access tutor (TF6) reported incidents of students saying things like “I didn’t think I was clever enough...”. This particular tutor described that she and colleagues are strategic in the ways in which they present topics to students in the early weeks of a course to avoid scaring them off. She emphasised the importance of breaking a task down and that in terms of doing research, writing a shopping list or finding out the local bus timetable can count as first steps towards this. In her words:

We don’t necessarily tell them everything that is in the middle because they would just run a mile. It is a little bit tactical. Not for us necessarily but when you see potential in somebody and you think if I tell them about quantitative research they won’t come back for another 3 years. Do you know what I mean? It is just about knowing the communities you are working in I think. (TF6).

Reflecting on the purpose of access courses, one tutor (TM4) emphasised the interrelationship between learning and confidence and how this can at times be more important than the acquisition of subject-specific knowledge. This links directly to wider employability literature and the notion that the development of certain attributes such as self-confidence and self-efficacy are synonymous with good learning (Maher and Graves, 2008). Tutor TM4 proposed:

I think that we need to remind ourselves sometimes that access to HE programmes are as much preparation for HE. We often get consumed by, we need to teach this specialism, the knowledge part although the knowledge part is probably the most incidental, it is getting them to be confident learners. And I think that once they develop skills they become confident.

Another non-access tutor (TF2) spoke of confidence building as being synonymous with learning and that the two go hand-in-hand. In her words:

I mean, the confidence building that is talked about, to me, is like a very early stage of education. It is no different really from other sorts of training because you are just getting people going. You are getting people into a room to socialise, to be able to meet with one another, to be able to make themselves feel a bit better and I can’t see the difference between that and learning really. It is a form of learning.

The same tutor spoke of courses being titled art or cooking and nowhere in the descriptor does it expressly mention confidence but in fact the course is all about confidence building.

When reflecting on watching her students grow, tutor TF6 observed that this is quite an intangible thing and it is difficult to assess and provide quantifiable evidence of it to satisfy institutional targets:

How do you quantify to senior management in the institution that you have watched this person grow? You could just be lying just to keep your job. I wouldn't want to be in this kind of job if I didn't see those kind of changes.

When seeking to articulate her view on developing students and helping them flourish, one tutor (TF3) shared a metaphor she regularly uses:

I can remember thinking so small of myself when I was sat in my car [before my first day as an adult returner]. I want my students to feel taller. That is a metaphor for being able to feel bigger. Shoulders back. To feel *I can* rather than I really can't.

Reasons for non-completion of a course:

Although much of the work on barriers emphasises what can block initial engagement, several tutors spoke about student drop-out from courses once they had overcome the hurdle of initial engagement and much of this echoes the original barriers material. When discussing why some learners leave the access course, all of the access tutors agreed that this is rarely attributable to a lack of ability. Instead the reasons for withdrawal are typically linked to childcare issues, illness or financial pressures. In other words the drivers for non-completion are typically personal and domestic, coming full circle with existing barriers literature.

One tutor (TF9) stated:

We can get extra support if it is academic. If they are having a problem with an essay then a tutor will sit with them again, give them more time to do it. We can't do anything about their personal problems unfortunately, as much as we try to.

This quotation affirms the ongoing, evolving nature of engagement trajectories and that catalysts and triggers continue to play a role in influencing individual learner participation even once a reengagement journey has been embarked upon.

5.7 Summary of tutor findings and link to student data

A number of interesting and original findings emerge from the analysis of the tutor interviews. In relation to institutional and wider issues the tutors reinforce the significance and impact of the basic skills deficits in the local area evident in chapter two's literature review and they reiterate the lack of jobs in the region as empirical clarification of the wider environmental circumstances potentially influencing students. The key challenge of improving the numeracy skills of local access students is highlighted alongside the perceived need for, and move towards, assessment on entry to access programmes (despite a preference against it in wider adult education) and the obstacle this can present for learners at the point of reengagement. The tutors highlight the many challenges students in the local region can need to overcome to return to education and the extent to which these are exacerbated by socio-economic deprivation in conjunction with the crucial role that access to higher education courses can play in giving learners a second chance (Wakeford, 1993). Much of the recent existing research into adult learner participation examines the supply side of education at an institutional and structural level (Boeren *et al.*, 2010; Swain and Hammond, 2011). In this context, tutors highlight the challenge of access courses in terms of their intensity and a reduction in local part-time provision resulting in a need for full-time study by mature students. The hurdles being imposed by higher education institutions regarding access grading and the potential impact of this on progression to HE represent a further potential institutional barrier. In addition in the wider adult education context (beyond solely access to HE courses), funding constraints have a significant impact on the availability of course offerings. A key finding introduced by the tutors pertains to the potential power of generativity as a motivator for students within the local area.

In terms of the broad theme of constraining and enabling forces, a number of findings emerge. Much of the existing barriers literature seems to resonate with the

experiences of these tutors across their range of adult education sectors. Nevertheless a view was expressed that little is being done to try to overcome the barriers. Tutors highlighted that learner participation and engagement is reportedly integrally linked with support available to students and given the concerns raised about a failure to overcome barriers, this highlights a need to do more within the wider adult education scene. In relation to how students potentially hear about a course - a fundamental aspect of learner engagement - development workers are perceived as playing a key role within a community to encourage participation by fostering a rapport and sense of familiarity with potential learners in adult education more widely. In terms of student 'recruitment', the power of support from fellow learners within the community is reported to be extensive, alongside word of mouth recruitment to promote and encourage engagement decisions. In addition, support from within a cohort reportedly plays a key role in sustaining ongoing reengagement. A further aspect of adult education work that has the potential to both constrain and/or enable is associated with pedagogic (or andragogic – see Knowles *et al.*, 1998) considerations. All of the tutors explained that when teaching within adult education it is imperative to think carefully about all aspects of pedagogy especially in view of the potential fragility of adult learner identities situated within this geographic region.

Building on this concern for the student experience and a desire to apply suitable pedagogy, the tutors express significant empathy towards their students as well as an awareness of the fear they may be experiencing. In conjunction with this depth of feeling, a number of the tutors seem to view adult education as a form of personal/vocational calling. The tutors begin to paint a picture of potential catalysts and triggers facing learners within the region based on their own learner trajectories, reflecting on negative school experiences including the prevalence of bullying, growing up in the local area and the triggering impact of a spouse's redundancy for example. Tutors recognise the transformative power of education acknowledging that reengagement in adult education has the power to transform the lives of learners and those around them and as a consequence it is imperative to further our understanding of the catalysts and triggers that surround student participation.

In terms of aspects of individual participation, many tutors describe having a diverse student body while the access tutors report the majority of their students are mothers

returning to education, often as women in their late 30s. In terms of reasons for returning, access students are perhaps unsurprisingly perceived by tutors to have the most vocational reasons for engaging. Although not unique to access students, these learners reportedly have clear ambitions to progress to HE. A number of non-access tutors cite subject interest as a key catalyst for participation and it can be refuted that potentially this is less the case for access learners who view access as a means to a distinct end (higher education participation) which is linked to clear vocational aspirations. A perceived desire for increased employability in order to improve their family life circumstances is frequently cited by tutors about their students' motivations. Tutors use language of personal and professional reasons for participation and introduce the notion of a stepping-stone.

The tutors all emphasise the uniqueness of individual learner journeys, which is pivotal in the context of considering catalysts and triggers from the interpretive perspective of personal trajectories. All tutors focus heavily on the socio-economic context of the local area and consequently this environment acts as a key circumstantial catalyst to consider. In terms of the interplay of catalysts and triggers, a number of tutors reflect on the relationship between timing just being right and more emotional elements. One tutor queried whether a student's decision to participate is linked to appropriate timing or if it is more strongly rooted in say familiarity with a development worker and/or more deep-seated emotions. The tutor suspected it is a combination of the two and this notion of potential convergence is at the heart of this catalysts and triggers investigation, to be explored further in chapter 6. Diverse potential influences on student participation were cited by tutors including: a desire to be role models (building on the aforementioned notion of generativity); unstable personal relationships; ageing parents; and, a latent sense of being unfulfilled to name a few.

Tutors acknowledge that a lot has to converge for reengagement to take place and that tapping into the desire for more felt by individuals balanced with providing appropriate educational opportunity is the key to reengagement. One tutor surmised that a fundamental aspect for students is finding the nerve to participate. Given the learner demographic of students being mothers, circumstances around childrens' age such as starting school are pivotal in terms of life stages enabling participation to be

logistically feasible. Tutors predict that a range of circumstances converge to foster and permit reengagement. As part of this, tutors reflect on their own learner journeys and demonstrate an ability to identify particular engagement triggers from their own trajectories. The development of student confidence coupled with students' sense of disbelief about their own abilities is reportedly a very prevalent experience and outcome of participation.

All of the above findings are valuable, offering insight into potential catalysts, triggers and the interplay of them for the adult returners in the context of this study. They paint a vivid picture of the circumstances in the region through the eyes of local tutors working in access and other adult education contexts, yet the tutor experiences can only tell us so much. In order to get to the heart of catalysts and triggers and to respond more fully to the research questions, it is necessary to elicit detailed perspectives from individual learners themselves to explore their personal journeys within this context and this constitutes the focus of chapter 6.

Chapter 6 – Thematic analysis of access student data

6.1 Chapter overview

As outlined in the methodology chapter, phase V, informed by phases I to IV, was undertaken during Spring 2011. This consisted of focus groups conducted in a semi-structured interview format, supplemented by the development of an illustrative critical life path exercise with access to higher education students at two local further education colleges. This resulted in 31 student responses, conceptualised as 31 individual learner cases (Stake, 2006). The participants were asked a series of questions (described in section 4.6), which had been informed by the literature review and piloted for clarity. A detailed overview of each learner case has been drawn from the interview narratives as well as the critical life path charts and the life path documents tell a consistent story with the interview narratives, serving as an important source of triangulation across the student data, as well as a useful original methodological tool acting as a projective exercise for generating qualitative data. It is interesting to note that two life path charts contained very sensitive personal information about the experience of sexual abuse as a teenager and the death of a disabled daughter and these personal histories were not disclosed during the group interviews. As a point of reflection, the very understandable decision to withhold this information orally during the group interview and the decision to disclose it in written form to the researcher demonstrates a high level of trust and openness in the researched and researcher relationship as well as supreme confidence in the level of confidentiality offered to participants in the study indicating the level of authenticity of experience communicated through the findings.

Two participants, F21 and M5, offered comments when completing their life paths that directly insinuate the histories that access course participants may have experienced. F21 asked, “do you want us to start [drawing on the life path] where everything went wrong at school?” and M5 observed, “how depressing is the access course? We’re all here because everything went wrong basically!”. Employing this additional element of the research methods further enabled the elicitation of reflections and meaning about students’ interpretations of their own experiences.

All of the views shared by participants were informative and invaluable however, the following quotation from participant F14 captures particularly powerfully the learning journeys some of the students have travelled and the level of transformation within their lives and outlooks. In the words of F14:

I didn't appreciate education because I didn't have no interest in education at that time. I thought I could get along in life without education, I didn't need education I thought at that time. [After being turned down for the access course] I went back on a preparation course and I came back again. And I tried again, and I did say to [the tutor] upstairs, the second time he interviewed me, 'I will keep coming back until you accept me. I'm going to keep coming back. Because I said to him, there's a chair in your room with my name on it and I'm gonna sit on it whatever it takes'. That's what I told him and he looked at me as if to say, 'oh?'.

Examining and understanding how this passion, commitment and transformation emerged is central to this enquiry. This chapter examines the findings from the student data in depth and five themes consisting of 28 sub-themes emerge across the data in relation to catalysts and triggers. The themes include:

6.2 Wider environmental issues (consisting of a sub-theme about the local area and (un)employment and the availability of work)

6.3 The experience of compulsory schooling (including sub-themes of positive experience of primary school, absence/presence of family support in education, mathematical ability, school socialisation, system constraints, exams as a deterrent, negative school experience and negative perception of teachers)

6.4 Examines emotions and motivation (including early ambition, regret, the sense of 'now or never', motivation, employability, achievement/pride)

6.5 Considers the theme of influences (detailed as the power of having money, relationships, the influence of others, having a family, role models, death, illness/health issues and the life path)

6.6 Addresses the theme of undertaking the course: from recruitment and application to ongoing engagement (consisting of sub-themes around how students heard about the course, experience of doing the course, applying to university, instilling a sense of self-belief and views on the value of education)

These themes are addressed in turn in this chapter and discussed in their totality in section 6.7. Although the individual themes may not initially seem to relate directly to catalysts and triggers in isolation, when considered holistically they offer powerful insight into the interplay of influences that impact upon engagement and shape learner identities.

6.2 Wider environmental issues

The majority of participants expressed an acute awareness of the socio-economic state of the local area, reinforcing evidence in the literature about deprivation levels and echoing views expressed by the local adult education tutors. This awareness served as both a motivator in terms of a perceived need to gain qualifications to try and secure employment and as a more intrinsic motivator in order to overcome a sense of stigma associated with the region. Responses relating to wider environmental issues relate to the local area, (un)employment and the availability of work.

The local area, (un)employment and the availability of work

A significant number of participants spoke of there being no jobs in the local area. One male interviewee (M6) who was particularly vocal about the lack of local employment explained his rationale for undertaking the course as, “I’m doing this course to get a job because there aren’t any around here”. Another participant, F20, described a similar concern that there are no jobs locally and that she feels she needs to gain a qualification in order to break her own cycle of being without employment or repeatedly being in a situation where she misses out on employment opportunities. Participant F4 expressed concern that the current recession would worsen or repeat itself and therefore she felt she needed to secure the future of herself and her family by gaining qualifications.

The majority of respondents expressed an acute awareness of the availability (or lack of availability) of employment opportunities and the ensuing implications. Several participants seeking to pursue a career in nursing spoke of the profession as being recession-proof and a job for life, demonstrating their concern to secure ongoing future employment. In the words of F2:

I think that when you are a nurse, when you are qualified, I think you will always find work somewhere.

F3, also planning to study nursing on completion of the access programme, expressed similar sentiments:

I thought it will be worth going for [the qualification] in the end. Once it is done it is a job for life.

One participant, F1, spoke of having found a job she enjoyed in a school but that it was not possible to keep her on due to funding constraints so she was faced with a change of job once again, something which had compounded her desire to make a change in her circumstances.

Two participants, F15 and M3, in addition to a significant number of others, spoke in detail about their experience of being in what they independently termed dead-end jobs. They both clarified that engaging in this type of work has galvanised them to pursue the access course so they can seek more fulfilling work. M3 described himself as knowing he has the capability to do more and that what he needed was “that kick up the backside, kicking himself and just getting the course done”.

Reflecting on her life before joining the access course, one female participant (F9) described how she never knew what she wanted to do and that she never dreamt of going to university. In discussing her lack of direction she described how she “thought [she] would be like the rest of ‘em – do nothing”. Although this sense of doing nothing and not participating in education seems juxtaposed with the early roots of adult education in Wales outlined in chapter 2, it reinforces much of the more recent evidence of poor participation levels and low levels of basic skills attainment, all of which are interconnected with limited employment opportunities within the region.

Several participants spoke of a desire to break the cycle of low achievement in the area and to overcome associated stigma. In the words of M4, who spoke firsthand of the experience of being unemployed:

I'm sick of living in somewhere that is portrayed as, the attitude that 'oh it's the Valleys, so you know, there's no point in trying, there's no future, blah blah blah' and I just think that it's wrong to just succumb to 'ah there's nothing to do so I'll drink, I'll take drugs, I'll do this', which is fine if you want to do that but at least work hard beforehand. I think that when you're unemployed, and there's not much work around here, you just don't want to be a statistic and to be seen as, spoken in general terms, to go through the dehumanising process of being unemployed and applying for jobs and being looked at like you are scum by these people who work in these places and to be totally patronised and treated like an imbecile. I could write a thesis on that.

Another participant (M5) also spoke of wishing to overcome stigma associated with the region while reflecting on the post-industrial state of the area:

When I said I wanted to go and do a degree, people looked at me as if I was a bit silly. I mean currently I'm pushing trolleys in Asda but I think, especially around these areas, you're supposed to just get in, just get on with your job and just do it and just stay with it. So to get out and do something with your life you know, I don't think, times are changing and you've got to go with yourself. We're not all going down the mines and getting work and then coming home. We want to do something for the future.

Participant F1 commented on the high number of people out of work in the local area and the influence she fears on her own offspring. In her words:

Where I live there's not a lot of people in work and I think they could be the sort of children who fall into that role couldn't they really?

Another respondent, F2, articulated similar concerns about her own son, expressing relief that he has not dropped out of school but instead has aspirations to attend university and to become a teacher.

One of the male participants spoke at some length about the challenges he has faced growing up in Merthyr Tydfil. In his words:

School for me was a pretty traumatic experience. Coming from sort of a rough area of Merthyr - not a particularly rough family, mum and dad worked - but mixing with students who weren't as... well brought

forward as I was. It was, it was once you'd been stigmatised from an early age that you were from a certain area of Merthyr, to go to a different area of Merthyr and study you always carried that stigmatisation with you I felt.

This participant's perception of carrying stigma directly echoes the experience expressed by tutor TF10 in chapter 5 of having worked in Merthyr and witnessed generations of families being negatively labelled with a limiting effect on their future potential.

One participant, M4, adopted a different perspective when discussing a long personal history of work in minimum wage roles. He stated that although he has never struggled to gain this type of employment in the past, the last three years following the economic recession have seen an increasing level of competition in all sectors as graduates are struggling to find work and therefore squeezing those with no qualifications out of the labour market, even at this level. In his words:

It was not a problem until three years ago and then the financial collapse really started to bite and kick in and then you've got all the graduates who've been doing pretty well, not Mickey Mouse degrees for the last ten years, but the people who've got degrees wouldn't have ever looked at a £12-14 grand a year job are now getting those jobs because there's nothing else for them which has pushed the level of employment that I can attain to totally out of the window. So I've got to do this just to come up to that stage again, despite all of the experience.

This participant's use of the term 'Mickey Mouse' degrees represents a scathing indictment in his view of certain qualifications that can be attained at higher education level today. Many of the participants depicted in the above section possess quite strong vocational motivations for engaging with additional education. Although potentially somewhat at odds with the liberal ideals underpinning the history of adult education, this is nevertheless potential evidence of today's policy discourse of increasing the skill level of the workforce and associated rhetoric being lived out. An awareness of the situation in the region and a vocational sense of urgency emerged as a permeating influence in the lives of all of these adult learners.

6.3 The experience of compulsory schooling

Agencies of socialisation, defined by Giddens (2009, p. 288) as "groups or social contexts in which significant processes of socialisation occur", can be influential and

therefore useful to explore when considering the early socialisation of learners. Agencies of socialisation include the family, schools, peer relationships and the mass media (Giddens, 2009). School experience emerged as a powerful influence for many of the access students in terms of their learner journeys and engagement decisions. A number of participants reflected on the transition from primary school to secondary school. For many, primary school represents a positive time associated with pleasant memories. Participants expressed challenges on arrival in secondary school, some of which they blamed on the teachers.

In the words of F2:

I loved school until the end of junior school. I had really good teachers. It was like a totally different teaching experience going from junior school and then up to comprehensive. I loved junior school but as soon as I went up to that big school. I think it was scary. I was quite shy, which is hard to believe now, but I was. I hated it. As soon as I went up to comprehensive then I hated it. I didn't like the teachers, I don't think they were very good at teaching to be honest. And I think they were the kind of teachers that if they knew you couldn't do something they would be more likely to have you up at the front of the class and they would say, 'right, do that on the board'. And they would tend to pick on the people that they knew couldn't do it. So I found it quite humiliating to be honest, but I think that was the teachers at the time.

In the words of M4:

School, early days was great, until sort of midway, midway through secondary school...the expectation just weighed on me, I felt a bit of pressure and started getting panic attacks, anxiety attacks, depression and stuff, couldn't sit in a classroom... I just fell victim to my own weaknesses and environment I think. I look at other people at that age and I think there was too much expected at that age, having to make decisions for the rest of your life, and it just got too much and I never went through with my GCSEs. I left at 15.

F12 reported enjoying school until reaching sixth form and leaving having felt 14 years in school was too long and that she was exhausted with education.

Family support in education

Several participants connected a lack of family support with their lack of engagement with compulsory education.

F1 suggested:

If I had the support from my family I would have possibly stayed. Most of my friends did. They stayed on and went to university straight away you know. There was only the odd couple of us who didn't.

F18 explained that she did not enjoy school and reported not being encouraged at home to attend school. In her words:

I didn't like school. I didn't have a very good home life and I wasn't made to go to school so half the time I didn't bother. Or I'd go, and then I'd just snitch off...I was a right little madam though... I wasn't interested in it at all. I'm not what I was when I was 16. I think it was the experience at home a little bit. I think your home life has got a lot to do with it. I think if you're happy at home then you'd be happy wouldn't you?

Other participants credit their regular attendance at school with pressure from family.

F12 explained:

I enjoyed school. I did. I was forced to go I suppose is the word by my parents... well I wasn't allowed not to go. So I didn't rebel against that... I never bunked. I was never one of them people.

F19 reported that her father used to make her attend school every day.

Participants reported having received very mixed levels of support from family whilst enrolled in compulsory education.

Respondent F1 described receiving no support from her family with regard to staying on at school beyond the age of 16. She explained that although they may not have resisted the idea of her furthering her education, no financial support was offered and

the expectation placed on her was that she would support herself financially from that point.

Participant F3 reported being allowed to waste her time at school but since then she has received encouragement from her mother to engage with the access course. Likewise F20 described the support she has received from her mother to enable her pursuit of ongoing education. Similarly F22's mother also encouraged her to undertake the access programme.

Respondent F4 described having a number of family problems at home when aged 14 and 15 and this resulted in her not attending any of her exams, even those she perceived she was capable of passing.

F6 explained that she is the only person in her family who stayed on at school beyond the age of 16 and as a result her father and grandparents do encourage her to work hard.

Another student, F7, explained how her family had little confidence in her academic abilities and despite having informed them that she had received 11 GCSEs, they seemed not to recall this achievement. In her words:

I got really good GCSE results and then even though I told all of my family my GCSE results they kind of just forgot about it. And then my Nan phoned me up a month later and she was like there's a job going but you do need GCSEs for it. And I was like Nan I've got eleven of them. So I was like 'excuse me!' But yeah they, they're always like you know 'she'll just get by' kind of thing.

This student expanded on this by explaining her family's perception of education and her own view that those wishing to further their education should be encouraged to do so:

In my family it is very much 'you go to school when you have to but afterwards you go out and you work'. It's just that my family are very money orientated and I just think that it is down to personal perspective of what you want to do. Some people do just want to earn money and that is fine and they shouldn't be persecuted for not wanting to go into further education but then others, if they want to, should be supported more.

F8 described that her own family had encouraged her but not pushed her to succeed at school, a situation driven by having witnessed the son of a family friend committing suicide.

Participant F9 spoke at some length about the attitude her family adopted towards educational success and participation. She explained that when engaged in compulsory education they pushed her as they felt she had the potential to achieve success where they themselves had not. Following her decision not to complete her exams and subsequently to withdraw from the navy, they now reportedly deride her aspirations to undertake the access course although she explained she chooses to interpret this as a motivator. In her words:

My own family took bets with me, how long I'd last. I don't know whether it's to aggravate and to push me that little bit harder. They were saying I wasn't going to do it, a bit of reverse psychology. It did wind me up. I don't know. I think they were trying to aggravate me. 'There's no point starting, you're not going to finish'.

F11 spoke of the emotions attached to being on benefits for several years since the birth of her daughter and the challenge she feels about trying to prove to her family what she is capable of. She explained that her mother plays an instrumental role in facilitating her current attendance as she regularly looks after her granddaughter to enable F11 to study.

Participant F12 described having been made to attend school by her parents and that up until fifth form she never rebelled against them. She reported that by sixth form she felt differently about the need to attend and this coincided with her parents no longer pushing her. Equally F19 described that her father used to make sure she attended school every single day while her mother did not place as much pressure on her.

F18 reported not enjoying school and not being made to attend. In her words:

I didn't like school. I didn't have a very good home life and I wasn't made to go to school so half the time I didn't bother. Or I'd go and

then I'd just snitch off... I think your home life has got a lot to do with it. I just didn't want to go to learn. I think if I'd had a little bit more support or you know 'go and do it – you're good', I think I would have made an effort.

Mathematical ability

A number of the students reported having found maths a particularly angst-inducing subject while at school. This finding is consistent with the views of the access tutors outlined in chapter 5.

F2 explained:

I was terrible at maths, and I would find the teacher that you had for maths, rather than picking who knew what they were doing, they would pick on the people further back that they knew couldn't do it. And they would have you right at the front and they would say work it out and you would say I can't do it, I can't do it and they would say 'well try and do it, make yourself do it' you know.

Although a number of participants expressed anxiety over maths as a subject, one respondent (F4) was particularly vocal about her experience, reporting on how significantly it impacted on her. In her words:

On the whole I found school, generally, OK. It was not a terrible experience, I just had trouble with one particular subject which was maths. I didn't really get the support, because back then they were not as quick on the support, they didn't spot it as early as they do now. So I struggled for a long time with that and it was really embarrassing so I started using coping tactics to hide, hide that particular disability if you like. It just went from bad to worse and by the time I got myself into secondary education I stayed on a year in the sixth form to do O-levels as they were then and obviously the core subjects had to be taken. I refused point blank to take maths. When they realised that I wasn't going to take maths one of the maths teachers did come down and she said 'I noticed that you're not doing maths'. And I said 'well, no I just can't do the subject, I've got no support at home and there's very little here. I'm not going to pass it, I would rather put my energies into the other five'. And all she said was 'oh, fair enough then, if you change your mind let me know and she just walked away' and I never heard any more. So it sort of confirmed, it sort of reinforced in me, well, yeah, waste of time, don't go there. And then that prevented me then for a very, very long time.

F4 also recounted having to line up at school to hand over your dinner money to the school secretary. She recalled a particular incident when she was struggling to count her money and the secretary referred to her as ‘dopey’ in front of all of her peers. She reported that the recollection of the interaction has never left her and it created a number of barriers for her at the time and she would regularly make up excuses including feigning illness to avoid having to line up or be involved in any mathematical activities in any way.

A further participant, F20, explained that despite many positive associations with school, she perceived her inability to do maths would block all of her future potential. In her words:

I loved school. I loved the sciences. And I loved the English language part of it. I wasn't too bad at RE either. Well actually I got so bad when I was doing my GCSEs I just didn't even go in for the ones I knew I could do. But that was because of family problems at home. At about 14 or 15 – that will be my big dip down. And I thought why am I bothering at all? If I can't get maths then I'm not going to get anywhere anyway.

School socialisation

Some participants reflected on experiences of bullying at school while others acknowledged that they became involved with the so-called wrong crowd or simply chose to rebel.

F5 described having been bullied. In her words:

I didn't make the most of school to be honest. I could have done a lot more than what I did do I'm now realising after I left school. I didn't enjoy certain years of the school due to, there was a group of people that sort of... bullied me. So that sort of spoilt some of my time at school. Looking back now, I wish I had made more of what I could have done.

F22 described how school was going well for until her friendship group changed. In her words:

High school, year 7 and 8 I was top set, really good, head down, and then got into the wrong crowd, started rebelling. Just got chucked out of school then at the age of 14. Then wasn't allowed to go back for my GCSEs.

F21 reported that although she had a positive experience at the beginning of high school, she started to rebel and began arguing with teachers and not completing homework.

Others expressed that school was a highly social experience for them, which resulted in prioritising social aspects over learning. F3 explained she “just messed about in school” and that she prioritised socialising rather than taking education seriously. A decision she reported to regret now. F6 described that she used to use school mainly as an opportunity to see her friends rather than engaging in any learning activities. F8 expressed a similar experience:

I didn't take it serious when I was there. I didn't realise how important it was. I did all right, but I was happy to see my friends and just because you're expected to go it's just part of the norm so you just go and I went and liked being with my friends. I think that's what it was. It just sounds awful now but as long as I was with them I wasn't really bothered.

System constraints

Some participants expressed that constraints in the system with regard to subject choice prompted their disengagement. F8 described:

It's different now because you get a lot more choice in subjects than when I had to choose when I was 14. I think I would have been happier if I'd have gone through education now but when I was there it was literally you are going to do a language, you are going to do history and you are going to do art. It was just your main core subjects you hadn't really got psychology or sociology.

F11 explained that at school they “could pick what [they] wanted as long as it was in the right box” and this resulted in limited subject choice.

F12 described that having been awarded a D for one of her GCSEs she was then precluded from taking an A-level she wished to study and this was a contributing factor in her decision to leave school.

Examinations as a deterrent

Several participants described that the negative experience or negative perception of sitting examinations triggered their decision to withdraw from school.

F13 described having enjoyed school but that the examinations presented a perceived obstacle for her. In her words:

I enjoyed school. I stayed on a year but didn't succeed. I gave up halfway through the second, the last year. I did enjoy it but when it came to like the exams and things I just poof – kaput. I just couldn't do the exams.

Negative school experience

A number of participants expressed how negative an experience school had been for them. Some blamed this on stigma associated with where they grew up while others attributed this to a lack of interest in learning or just generally disliking the school environment.

M1 explained that he found school traumatic as he came from an area of Merthyr Tydfil that attracted the stigma of being particularly challenged and he felt he carried that label with him throughout school despite his desire to succeed. He reported being told repeatedly at school that he would never amount to anything nor should he ever expect to.

F10 reported not enjoying any aspect of school and that she would seek any excuse not to attend and regularly intentionally missed the bus when her father was working so she could not get there. In her words:

I just didn't want to be there, at all. I just didn't like going. That was that to be honest.

F14 described her non-attendance and the reasons for it as follows:

I didn't like school whatsoever. I was always truanting. I had no interest in school, I had no interest in studying and I left at 16 I think. I didn't like high school at all. I didn't appreciate education because I didn't have no interest in education at that time. I thought I could get along in life without education, I didn't need education I thought at that time.

Participant F15 described having not enjoyed school. She reported being more of a hands-on learner and that in her view the teachers focused their attention on the more academic students. She left school without completing her O-levels. Respondent F16 explained she did not enjoy school because she had no interest in it at the time and that there was very little support offered. F17 described having 'bunked' off school and referred to herself as a 'bunker' between the ages of 14 and 16. She proposed that if she had been shown a video of what the world had to offer she would have chosen to engage more.

Negative perception of teachers

Six participants placed blame on the teachers when reflecting on negative learning experiences.

F1 described having been humiliated by teachers in front of classmates and that her maths teacher was known for throwing the board rubber at pupils.

F2 spoke at length about hating the entire experience of secondary school because of the teachers. In her words:

I would have liked to stay on. I had it in my mind that I would go to university and everything but I just hated it. As soon as I had finished my last GCSE I went to get my papers and I thought 'oh thank god that is the last time I will see that place and all the teachers'. Because I just hated the teaching, well, the whole experience I had in school. They are only little experiences and they only happen in school but it does affect you doesn't it. Like I can still see those teachers' faces in my mind. Do you know if I met them now, what I would like to say to them!

Reflecting on her current achievements of being on the access course, F15 explained:

I really, really didn't believe I could do this. Because I think more than anything the teachers made me believe that I couldn't do it.

F18 explained her perception of the calibre of teaching in her former school:

The teachers were really slack in my school anyway and if they had a naughty child in the class then the whole class was punished for it and you weren't taught.

Reflecting on his experience from school M4 explained:

You were belittled if you didn't understand something, even if you were taught to ask. In any situation putting your hand up was worse but that was depending on the teacher. It's not what you're learning it is how you are being taught it. So I think that has got a big effect.

M7 described that a negative relationship with one particular teacher had coloured his school experience. In his words:

School was all right up until year 9 when one of the teachers decided she doesn't like me and everything I did kind of put her off me. So I kept getting pulled out. I went for 5 of my GCSEs and only passed with the basic 3. Science, maths and English and I've come back here to get a better grade.

One participant (M2) cited his perceived infantilisation and being treated like a child as his reason for leaving school:

Yeah, school was all right. It wasn't, it wasn't a negative experience, you know, it's you know, you do a lot of growing up in school. I think. I left school with my GCSEs, I started doing my AS levels but I don't know, I just felt as though you're being treated like a child, even though when you're 16, 17. So, that's what made me leave. Really I left with all my GCSEs and that was it really. But school was a good experience for me it. It wasn't a difficult time. I enjoyed it.

There is merit in noting that none of the participants made reference to having received diagnoses of either dyslexia or dyspraxia while at school, although several female respondents with children alluded to how schools are better at diagnosing such conditions these days. It may be that none of the participants possess these conditions or instead that schools for various reasons did not pick up on this spectrum of learning

difficulties. Ingesson (2007) reports there is a scarcity of research into the psychosocial impact of dyslexia although evidence suggests it can be linked to lower self-esteem, a sense of inferiority as well as lower levels of school achievement.

6.4 Emotions influencing and motivations driving the students

While compulsory schooling has reportedly played an influencing role for many, shaping their attitudes towards education, a number of emotions and motivations emerge as being present amongst the student participants including early ambition, regret, a sense of ‘now or never’ with regard to participation, employability and achievement/pride.

(Early) ambition

The majority of participants made reference to early ambitions to attend university to pursue careers such as nursing but described that a combination of circumstances and experiences had derailed these aspirations temporarily. Many of the reflections are powerful, demonstrating negative school experiences and a perception of lacking self-worth.

When reflecting on her desire to progress to higher education, F1 expressed a sense of having possessed a latent sense of ambition inside herself:

Yeah, it's there, it's in the back of your mind. I've never said that before, but it is there.

As detailed in chapter 5, Tutor TF3 spoke at length about the nagging sense of wishing to do something and the feeling that one is worth more than can pervade adults' sense of self.

Participant F2 described having aspirations to go on to university but that her negative school experience meant she chose to leave formal education. In her words:

I just couldn't wait to leave school because I hated it. I had it in my mind that I would go on to university and everything but I just hated it. As soon as I had finished my last GCSE I went to get my papers

and I thought ‘oh thank god that is the last time I will see that place and all the teachers’.

Another student (F3) spoke of having only ‘messed around’ in school because she knew she planned to join the army. She admitted she had not made any plans for her life once she left the army and as a consequence regrets that she did not take school more seriously.

A number of respondents explicitly stated they never envisaged themselves going on to university even though they possessed these aspirations while at school. In the words of F4:

I just didn’t think [higher education] was accessible to somebody like myself. I think that passing that small level 1 numeracy test really started the ball rolling for me and when I passed the level 2 I thought I was Carole Vorderman! Because I felt more confident where the maths was concerned I felt better about myself so that gave me the motivation to try, sort of like turning the clock back to leaving school, to that time period. It was like a second chance.

As discussed subsequently under the theme of regret, participant F5 witnessed her friends going to university and while she felt this would have been something she could have achieved, having her daughter at the age of 17 altered the direction of her life.

Although he did not specifically mention possessing aspirations to attend higher education during compulsory schooling, M1 spoke at some length about having been discouraged from applying to university and his desire to “better [himself] from within in order to fill a gap that isn’t being filled”. He described:

I was sort of from that era in school where you were told never to expect anything more than you got. That was the attitude when I was in school. It is true what they say, if someone tells you long enough then you think OK it isn’t going to happen. It wasn’t until later in life when I realised that these choices are more open now than they were twenty years ago. When I was in school only the posh people who had money went on to higher education.

Another participant, F7, discussed her pride in her current achievements as while growing up she was reportedly not perceived as an exceptional student:

Personally I am quite proud of myself because my family always thought... growing up I was always a C average person. Just getting by kind of thing. So I'm proud of myself now that I'm actually, you know, aiming for something higher, something better.

Participant F8 spoke of her perceived misplaced ambition while at school and that although she decided to stay on and attend college, it was not the right decision for her at the time. She articulated that at that age she did not recognise the importance of pursuing those ambitions. She explained that she had always wanted to teach but instead opted to "just [get] a job that gave [her] money" and it is only recently that she realises that she is seeking more than a wage and instead engagement with something about which she is passionate.

Adopting a different perspective on ambition, respondent F9, described how she had no aspirations to attend higher education but like respondent F3, did possess a desire to join the armed forces. In her words:

I wanted to go to the navy. That's all I ever wanted to do. And I went, and I didn't like it. I never knew what I wanted to do. Never. Nothing. When the navy didn't work out I just thought I'd be like the rest of 'em then. Do nothing. I never had any other plans. That was my plan. I never dreamt of going to university.

A number of respondents reported that they had never foreseen their return to education as adults. In the words of F10:

I don't think I thought I'd come back to education at all. I was happy plodding along and then I had my son and then I think your perspective changes then. But if you'd said to me 5 years ago you'll be going back to college and applying for university I would have just laughed.

Respondent F11 described how she had briefly attended university after school but left the course after a short period of time and never envisaged returning to higher education. In describing her renewed ambitions she explained:

The access course came along and you just... I think it's not so much about the access course it's about what you wanted to do. I think it came to a point you think well I could easily go and work in a supermarket again and go carry on for many years doing that but that's not something that I want to do.

F11 explained that she never envisaged reengaging with university as an adult: the opposite of her earlier ambitions to attend university immediately after school.

Another respondent, F12, explained that she had wanted to become a nurse but had left school without enough qualifications to gain entry to an HE degree programme. The access course is allowing her to fulfil her ambitions to pursue a nursing career. Described her latent ambitions she explained:

When I was younger, you know what kids are like they want to be this and they want to be that and I was always interested in being a vet because I love dogs, I love animals. But then I thought no. I think everybody wants to be a vet at some point and I think everyone wants to be an astronaut as well. But, I don't know. I think that when I was in school I didn't want to go to uni straight from school and I think that's why I left.

F12 proceeded to work for McDonalds for 10 years after leaving school. She explained that approximately halfway through her employment with the company she knew "there was something else out there for [her]". She reported having tried to discuss the idea of returning to education with her employer but as she was always met with resistance and opposition to reducing her contracted hours she decided to resign. In her words she sought to "make a clean break, no middle ground and no sitting on the fence" when the opportunity to pursue the access course arose.

Another female participant, F13, reflected on her early ambitions to pursue nursing and how she felt this aspiration could never be realised as her adult life unfolded. In her words:

When I had my children and got married I just, you just think that's just part-time work then because the children are young and things you know so you just don't plan. I just didn't think I would do anything. You just don't think then do you? I've always wanted to be a nurse but then when I didn't get my qualifications I thought 'oh my chances were gone'. Then I had the children and I thought 'my chances were even more gone now'. But now with them getting older I'm thinking 'oh', and then when I did find the course I'm thinking 'now it's my time. My time to do what I've always wanted to do'. So I did. I never thought I would do anything like it I thought. To be honest. Didn't think.

F14, a mother of three, spoke passionately about her disbelief surrounding her newfound abilities and her application to university:

If somebody had told me a few years ago that I was actually being accepted and going to university I would have laughed in their face.

She described how she had undertaken a series of dead-end jobs while watching her three children, all now teenagers, growing up and finding their own ways in the world and having experiences like travelling abroad that she herself had never dreamt of. In her words:

I felt as if I was just at a junction and that I didn't have no way to go. They were all just going and leaving me behind. You know. What was I going to do or what can I do? What am I capable of doing? And when I got turned down for the access course the first time I thought well, I'm not really capable of doing anything. I can't be. It has just proved it to me that I can't. But then I enrolled in that course and I told them that I'd got turned down for access and I told them the area that I got turned down in you know and I really worked hard because I wanted to do it. I wanted to further it, I wanted to go on further. And I kept saying it didn't I F15? I want it. I want it. I want it.

Both participants F15 and F16 described having always wanted to study criminal justice and nursing respectively but life circumstances had prevented them until now. Participant F20 spoke of always wanting to go to university but not knowing what to study. As for F16, her own personal circumstances reportedly make now the right time to engage and this has been coupled with the discovery of a passion for nursing.

Similar to a number of other participants, F18 described having had a latent ambition to "do something" and expressed "I think it's always been in the back of my mind". She reported that she studied to be beautician but found the course unfulfilling.

F19 spoke of her father's ambitions for her to go to Oxford University, aspirations which seemingly did not match her own. She herself reported that even two or three years ago she would not have considered studying access with a view to pursuing a nursing career. In her words:

No, I never ever thought I would go to university. I haven't yet but I'm applying. When I was like five, I was like I want to be a nurse but

that's when you're a kid isn't it? No, I never thought, I never thought I'd go on to university, ever. I'm proud of myself for trying.

M2 spoke of having saved up money to go to university even though at the age of 16 he decided to spend this reserve on purchasing a car and a guitar. He reported that the ambition was nevertheless present. Similarly M3 explained his longstanding desire to study in HE. In his words:

I've always wanted to go to university. I mean since I left school do you know what I mean? So I always knew that was where I visioned myself to end up. But obviously when I left home that wasn't really much of an option for me, I needed to work. So as soon as that opportunity became available to me I took it. So definitely, I've always thought, I always knew that one day I would attempt it. One day I would come to university.

Another male participant, M6, who reported a negative experience at secondary school, explained that although he had aspirations to attend university, his school experience made him not wish to study further at the time. Similarly M7 described his intentions of applying to university but that he never planned to go there straight from school and each year he would postpone it to the next.

Regret

While reflecting on their educational journeys, nine participants expressed sentiments that were coded broadly as regret. Students made comments such as "I just wish I had done it years ago" (F1) and "I didn't really take school seriously at all. I wish I had now. I wish I could go back now and do it" (F3). Both of these individuals acknowledged that the time is right for them to be engaging again now however. In describing her educational trajectory and choices, another student, F5, expressed the following:

A lot of my friends went on to university and obviously my life went in a different direction because I had my little girl when I was 17 so, I knew I could have done something different but then obviously other things took the direction and you know, looking back, there's no regrets obviously but I feel like I wish I had done it then and changed the direction around. You know, had my little girl later on in life.

Another female participant, F8, reflected on her desire to pursue further study for a number of years and why it had taken her so long to decide to engage:

When I left work I had a book sort of that they had all put together and I only read it the other day because I just couldn't face reading it and this one woman I'd known for years she'd put in there 'I didn't think you'd actually do it because you've been on about it for years'. And I thought that just sums it up because I've been on about it for ages. You don't, the years just roll by. And I just thought, yeah I have, and she's right. I've actually done it now... Why didn't I do this like 15, 16 years ago?!

A significant number of the participants demonstrated an acute focus on the passage of time both retrospectively and looking ahead to the future, counting at times in units of days, weeks and months. In the context of anticipating regret, participant F9 explained that although there are five months left on the course, if somebody chose to drop out they would be barred from reapplying for approximately four to five years. They calculated that waiting that long to restart the access course, followed by the one-year programme and then a university course on top, would render them to be too old in their eyes to engage again and that they would lack the required drive. Therefore having weighed up the alternative and considered the time that withdrawal would cost them, they have opted to resist the urge to give up and avoid potential regret in the future.

F11 also reflected retrospectively on the time they felt they had lost and how different their life would be if they had gone straight to university and immediately secured their desired qualification. F13 equally lamented not working harder in school and how if she had, she would be a qualified nurse by now. This respondent did acknowledge however that her life would have followed a different route in that case and that perhaps she would not have had the staying power for the course then and equally she would not have had her children.

M4 spoke powerfully about the emotions he experienced as a member of the labour market who had left school without qualifications. In his words:

I've got similar feelings about leaving school, always feeling um, like, kind of handicapped by it, disabled, even if I was working and I had got a job and was alongside people with degrees and holding my own

and sometimes holding them as well, like I say on paper and then mentally, always feeling like I've missed out, and it bothered me for a hell of a long time. Up until about 3 or 4 years ago when I did the foundation. Even though I didn't do a full degree, just to do that year and get that year away was like a personal Everest for me. And nobody else in the room knew that and it was a big thing for me that.

F22 described the awakening they had experienced on joining the access course and succeeding academically in a way they never felt they could. This personal discovery reportedly coincided with a sense of frustration that they did not perform better while at school. In their words:

It showed me how academic I really was. I didn't really know. I thought, because I got kicked out and everything I thought I wasn't capable of... because I never used to go to maths I thought oh I'm rubbish at maths, I can't do it. And so because I never used to go I wasn't learning it and I never knew that's why. But like when I come on this course then I realised how I can do this and I am academic. And in maths now everything he's teaching it's my first time to learn it but I'm getting it. So I'm like maybe if I did do it in school I would have had my GCSE and done good so it's like a big regret in that way.

The sense of 'now or never'

A significant number of participants articulated experiencing a strong sense of 'now or never', reinforcing the concept of lifespan development and the existence of stages perceived by individuals, realising that they may be coming to the end of something and that there is a finite amount of time for action. Despite many of the students having been out of formal education for several years or even several decades, many of them described having wished to commence the access course immediately once they had decided to take part. The majority of these students also described the urgency with which they wished to progress to higher education the following autumn and that taking even one year out would impact upon their momentum and in some cases, potentially derail their educational ambitions completely.

In the words of F1:

I just feel as if I haven't got enough years left to wait a year, you know, if I don't do it now....

Building on this feeling, F2 explained:

I'm in the position now. Not that much money, but enough money to see us through, I thought I'm just going to leave work and I'm going to do it. Because I thought 'if I don't do it now, it will be too late and I won't ever think of doing it again'. So that is what got me to the point of doing it last year I think. I just woke up one morning and I thought that is it. Something snapped in work. I think we had a visit from somewhere and when they came in I thought, 'urgh, I can't do this any more'. And then I wrote my resignation letter while they were still in the building and I gave it to them and there was just literally this spur of the moment thing like that. I thought 'oh no, I'm going to do it because if I don't do it now, I never will'. Yeah, I think that we need to keep the impetus up. We need to do it now. I think that is the way it worked with this course. We had that moment where we thought, 'right we are going to do this now' and I think this is the stage we are at when we are thinking that we need to go to university now to keep it going. I think a lot of it is to do with that eureka moment. You just go, 'I can't do this any more. I need to do that and I need to do it now.' It is that moment like F1 said where everything just comes together. And you just think, 'right, do it'.

Although not quite expressing the sentiment of now or never like F1 and F2, both F3 and F4 explained that once they had thought about joining the access course they decided to join swiftly.

In the words of F3:

I don't do thing by halves I don't. If I do something I just want to do it there and then. I don't think about anything. I just think 'right, I'm going for it'! And that's what I done.

For participant F4:

I've said it before that I'm knocking on now. So I thought well right I better, that's the one then. That's it.

Expressing clearly the urgency of 'now or never', M1 explained:

It was a case of 'this is it'. For me, it's a case of, is there ever a wrong time? I'm 34 years old now and I think to myself, 'well, it's now or never really'. It is just the right time for me now.

F6 explained that if she did not take steps to participate immediately she may not have opted to engage at all:

I think if I didn't do it now I wouldn't have done it. I would have just stayed in work and earned money.

F7 communicated the same sentiment:

If I didn't do it now I never really would have.

Similar to F2 who made a seemingly spontaneous decision to participate, so too did F9:

I just woke up one morning and thought well if I don't do it now I'll never do it.

Having explained that the circumstances were right for her, F10 described how she made a decision that she should embrace applying for the course immediately:

I had the forms and I was waiting to send it. It was just like, no, I'm going to hand them in. I did and I never looked back.

F11 communicated a similar feeling about the benefit of applying and being accepted rapidly:

I sent the form in and then I had an interview date then. I think I found out by the June that I had the place. I got a letter in the house. It weren't long. It were really quick. That was better. I think if it took a while I'd be thinking 'oh I'm not going to even bother'. But it was short.

Participant F12, a former long serving employee of McDonalds, described how despite having debated about leaving the company over the period of a number of years in order to return to education, the final decision to resign was made swiftly following attendance at a training course:

It took me four years because McDonalds were always luring me back in with, 'if you'll stay we'll do this'. But then in June last year I went on a course with McDonalds and we had to do Maslow's hierarchy and had to write down three things we aimed to do within five years. It was our five-year plan. And everyone else was writing down things to do with getting promoted and I couldn't write anything down about McDonalds. I came back from my course and I had a week off and then I left. It was like ripping a bandage. I said to my mother either rip it off in one swoop or I stay there. I would never have done this course part-time because part-time would have still been 30 hours a week and I'd rather not have any money and do this because this is what I want to do. This isn't the next five years this is potentially the next 30. So that was more important.

F16 described the day she decided to make a change and that once again for her, as for a number of the other participants, a change in circumstances was enacted swiftly:

I woke up and thought I don't want to keep doing this. I was running my own business, which I'd had for a year and a half and I decided that I was going to sell it. So I put it on the market and it was from an impulse. It was one day I said to them 'right I've had enough. I'm going to return and do what I've always wanted to do'. Although I did enjoy running the business it wasn't what I wanted. My heart wasn't really in it. I think it was things that had been building on. This one day I remember sitting on my chair and just thinking this isn't really me. It had been going on for a while. Just plodding on thinking, plodding on. And I'd always done that throughout my life thinking 'oh, I'll just put up with it'. And this one day I just said 'no, no more'. So I just got the phone, dialled, and thought I would make an appointment. And literally I didn't think I'd manage to sell the business. I thought 'oh well I might be stuck'. But as soon as I tried to sell it my business went within a week. And I started here in the September. I literally had four weeks, and it was lovely. I just started here then.

Like many of the other participants, F20 who previously took voluntary redundancy also found herself applying and enrolling rapidly:

I think it was about four weeks before the course started. I just thought 'oh my gosh I'm going to do it' and I think because I didn't have that much time to think about it, it was like right, I'm going to do it. So I came down, went right, enrolled and before I knew it I was starting. I just think that because it was so quick, I think if I'd thought about it for too much I'd have been, 'oh no, I'm not going to'.

Similarly F19 stated:

Now or never I thought. If I don't do it now I'll never do it.

Participants M2 and M3 described how they were both attracted to the course because of its one-year duration and each expressed a pressing sense of urgency that waiting two years, which A-levels or a part-time programme would have taken, would have been too long for them.

Despite the apparent sense of immediacy and spontaneity evident in many of these accounts of decisions to reengage, when considered in the broader context of the individual learner lifespans articulated through the interview discussions and the

accompanying life path charts, there is evidence of a wide range of influences compounding the participation decisions.

Motivation

The students articulated a number of different motivations for deciding to undertake the access course and to pursue a change in career at this point in their lives. Many cited vocational aspirations but each individual reported their own unique background circumstances and emotions. A number of participants described having notably selfless community-oriented motivations, many unwittingly demonstrating concerns of generativity as classified by Erikson (1963) and elaborated by Withnall (2003) and Slater (2003).

Participant F5 described seeking a more rewarding role, wanting to “make a difference to people’s lives” and having reached her promotional potential within the financial services sector. Similarly participant M1 explained he really “wanted to make a difference to the lives of people in Merthyr Tydfil” and that he aspired “to do something worthwhile”. F21 expressed a desire to work in social services in order to support children experiencing deprivation and F23 expressed a desire to work specifically with autistic children. Like F5, F16 spoke of having reached her potential in her previous role and that nursing also felt like much more of a calling. One student spoke in terms of seeking to find happiness in a job that they would find fulfilling. Although this participant chose not to vocalise their more personal motivations during the oral interview, they made reference on the life path chart to having been sexually assaulted as a teenager and that they are seeking a career in child protection to facilitate the prevention of others being abused in the way that they themselves were.

Participant F10 spoke in terms of the birth of her son having been a watershed to reappraise her life. In her words:

I was happy plodding along and then I had my son and then I think your perspective changes then.

F11 described how difficult she is finding the course but that thoughts of her daughter and her reasons for taking part prevent her from withdrawing.

F18 highlighted that a key motivator is “having a job that you like”.

M4 described engaging with the course as “empowering”. He described feelings of wanting to “buck the trend” and “break the mould” and that he was tired of being overshadowed in the workplace by those with qualifications.

F24 described being motivated by the need to be able to benefit herself in the event of the demise of her family.

Employability

All of the participants in the study expressed vocational motivations for their engagement with the access course. A very significant number made an explicit link between the access course and subsequent acceptance in higher education and the resulting impact on their employment prospects rendering the access programme as a necessary pre-requisite for career purposes.

Many of the participants identified a range of relevant aspects of employability through their discussion. One participant, F2, explained in detail that through the different positions she has held, including working in a bank for six years, she has developed a range of qualities and above all an improved sense of self-confidence – a key employability attribute (Yorke and Knight, 2006).

Several respondents aspiring to be nurses recognised the employability skills and qualities required for nursing beyond the purely subject-based knowledge. Two of these participants highlighted the particular strengths that they themselves possess as mature learners.

In reflecting on their own career trajectories to-date, a number of participants reported having been promoted in their own existing employment sectors from say cashier to assistant manager but all had reached a ceiling beyond which they would require additional qualifications.

A number of respondents distinguished a difference between the concept of a job versus a career and cited numerous examples of jobs that have failed to make them truly happy. In the words of F7:

The reason why I didn't really bother with further education was because I just wanted to have money and I'd done a lot of different sales roles and I've had so many different jobs it's unreal. Um, but I always quit them because I was never happy and I realised that I was never going to be happy until I got my job that I wanted. So it is time then to come into education again.

Building on this, F12, described her aspirations to pursue a nursing career that would require a qualification and that her ambitions exceeded assuming a post within healthcare that didn't require a degree:

I'm doing this because I want to be a nurse. So this is what I needed to do, to just get in. It could have been easy for us to go into care work but that would have been it. We would have just plateaued out there. And we would have stayed there until we were old and wrinkly and they were looking after us. But I think with nursing, because we are widening what we know, and broadening our knowledge, there are so many different avenues and I think that that is what education means to me. I think in the world we live in at the moment as well, there is so much difficulty out there. I'm not saying that an education will guarantee you employment, I'm not saying that at all, but I think that you should widen what you can do, what you know. And that's what we're doing now.

Other relevant comments in relation to employment and employability orientations included:

F15 – “I was just settling in jobs I was. Thinking I couldn't do anything else. I was just settling”.

F18 – “It's having a job that you like”.

F18 previously worked as a beautician, a job she described as “really boring. It's a job you don't have to think about. Wax legs, wax arms”. She described seeking a job that would be fulfilling.

F19 – “I don't want to work a dead-end job just having minimum wage. I am doing this to get a tidy job like”.

M6 – “I'm trying to get more qualifications to get an actual job”.

F23 – “I don’t just want a job, I want a career”.

F17 articulated that she feels there is an onus on schools to tell students more about the wider world to motivate them to work harder in order to be able to gain access to opportunities:

If in school they had said, if they actually tell you ‘right if you want to be a nurse or a doctor or blah blah blah you are going to have to have these grades’. They just don’t tell you do they? They say ‘oh you’ve got to do GCSEs’ but at that time we were like why? We don’t care. It’s just a test. They should really explain why you needed the GCSE and actually explain the bigger world beyond Aberdare. Because when you’re young you think ‘oh Aberdare, I can go out drinking now I’m 18 blah blah blah’. If they showed us a video of the world and the holidays you can have and everything, do you get me? You would be like right I’ll work harder.

It is interesting to note this participant feels the responsibility should be placed on the school as opposed to the student themselves or their family in needing to take responsibility for this exposure and learning. This potentially links to elements of cultural and social capital and wider issues associated with socio-economic deprivation.

Achievement/pride

A significant number of participants reported experiencing feelings of achievement and pride as well as a sense of positivity about their current circumstances when discussing being on the access course.

In the words of F1:

Money is a big problem but I mean, that’s the only problem I’ve got. Apart from money, I am in a better place now than I have been for a long time.

In the words of F2:

It’s an achievement for us just coming to college I think for me and F1 because we’re older. That’s what I think anyway and to have achieved what we have so far is well you know, we have worked hard, we’ve given up a lot to come here and do what we’re doing. So, it is nice to know that we are achieving a certain level.

When describing the first activities undertaken in relation to her initial reengagement with formal education, F4 reflected on how she felt when she passed her level 2 numeracy at a local college:

He came out and he said you've passed... and I cried all the way home in the car. I did, I cried. I was shaking. I was absolutely shaking. It was such a relief! I felt a bit better about myself. It did boost my confidence. If I didn't secure the level 2 in numeracy I think that might have held me back yet again.

In the words of M1:

It is like every day I surprise myself. Every day I am still here, it's an achievement really.

F7 reflected:

Personally I am quite proud of my self because my family always thought... growing up I was always a C average person. Just getting by kind of thing. So I'm proud of myself now that I'm actually, you know, aiming for something higher, something better.

In reflecting on her own accomplishments, F14 highlighted the achievements of the entire cohort:

By the end of the year we've achieved 5 A-levels. So coming from nothing to achieving 5 A-levels in a year. I think everybody on this course should be proud of themselves, no matter how young, or how old, you are really. Like I got three teenage children and like I'm the only one that drives in the house so all the after school activities every night of the week I've got to take them and besides that me and F15 volunteer with the youth offending team. So we've got to fit that in, plus your family life plus your coursework so to achieve that at the end, to stand up at the end with your certificate is going to be a really proud moment, for everyone I think.

F14, F15 and a number of other participants undertake voluntary work in order to support the local community. This serves as further evidence of their orientations towards generativity.

F16 spoke of her own accomplishments in light of the pressures of the access programme for all the students:

I feel quite proud of myself for returning and achieving. Like F14 says, you've only got so many weeks and for everybody to achieve what they are achieving I think is a tremendous goal. For me walking in that door, because I walked in here on my own you see. I didn't know anybody. And I just walked in and I am not the type, I am quite quiet and I remember walking in the room and thinking 'oh my god if they ask me who I am I'm just going to die'. And I remember walking in and thinking, 'right, I've got to bite this bullet'. For me that was a big achievement in itself. The thought of coming in and not knowing anybody and having to be put in a room with lots of people, that frightened me. That to me is a personal goal, just getting there.

This sentiment parallels the feelings expressed by tutor TF3 in chapter 5 who sat in the car, scared to go in, prior to her first day back in formal learning.

In the words of F20:

I just keep thinking, I can't imagine how proud, how proud of myself I will be if I do get into uni.

In the words of F18:

I just thought well I'm going to do it, I'm going to do something. And I'm quite proud of myself. Well I woke up this morning and I thought, 'I'm proud of myself'. Because I've done the work, because I've never, do you know what I mean I've never done any of this stuff. Even the maths we're doing I've never done because I didn't do maths in school, I didn't go to the lessons. And even though it frustrates me I think 'oh yeah I can do this now, I'm proud of myself.' Whatever happens I'm mega proud. I was mega proud when I got a merit. And then when he gave me distinctions in biology I nearly fainted.

According to F19:

No, I never ever thought I would go to university. Like I haven't yet but... Like when I like 5, I was like I want to be a nurse but that's when you're a kid isn't it? No, I never thought, I never thought I'd go on to university, ever. I'm proud of myself for trying.

The above examples encapsulate the sense of pride felt by each individual learner.

6.5 Influences and events during the life course

Participants recounted in depth a wide range of influences and events that have shaped their past attitudes to learning and their current reengagement. These include: the power of having money; relationships; the influence of others; having a family; acting as a role model; death; illness and health issues; and, events across the life path.

The power of having money

A significant number of participants discussed the impact of finances on their earlier life choices. Nine in particular described how earning a wage from employment served as a powerful motivator for them to withdraw from education. All nine of these participants articulated that having money at their disposal enabled them to go out and eclipsed any other ambitions they may have had at the time. Each of the interviewees expressed regret that money had lured them in this way. F15 described herself as “just settling for the wage pack at the end of the week” while F16 described that the work she did was “never satisfying or fulfilling” and that although stuck in a rut, in their words, the money kept them going. Another participant, F18, explained that they worked in a factory and that they were satisfied at the time as they earned enough money to go out. F19 explained how she dropped out of college once she got a job because she thought money was more important than getting an education. A decision F19 reported strongly regretting today. Reporting on a similar change in priority, M2 recalled:

I remember I had money saved up for university and I spent it on a car and a guitar. You know, at the time it wasn't in my plans but as I said as you grow up you kind of, you need to take things into account. You know I felt as though it was the right way to go but at the time it wasn't on the cards for me at all when I was 16.

The experience articulated by F8 encapsulates many of the sentiments expressed by her peers:

I always wanted to teach. Always. And I just got in a job and it gave me money and then, you don't, do you know what I mean. Especially at that age I wasn't interested, I didn't really care that I didn't enjoy

my job. It's only as you get a bit older and then you think 'well actually, I'd like to get up and be excited about going to work' instead of thinking oh, dragging myself out of bed again and looking at every hour and thinking 'oh I don't want to be here, I don't want to be here'.

Similarly F20 reported equating having money and the means to go out socially as fulfilling all of her needs at the time. She viewed going to university as limiting her income for four years and that therefore she would rather keep her job and freedom. Her perspective has changed however as she says, "the older you get you look back and think that was a bit of a stupid attitude to have".

In the words of F22:

When I left school I didn't realise how valuable qualifications were and how much you needed them. I thought just get a job and have money, happy days. But it's not the case. And I realised that when I had my son. When it comes to money, money is limited. So I realised then, you need to better yourself.

Three additional participants (F6, F7 and F17) also expressed similar sentiments.

Relationships

Relationships and relationship breakdowns reportedly acted as key triggers for a number of the access students' participation. For participant F1, leaving her husband has enabled her the freedom to undertake the course. In her words:

I left my husband. It sounds funny but I wouldn't have had the support to do this really if I was with my husband. He wouldn't have wanted me to do this.

In reflecting on her critical life path, F1 explained how her feelings about her marriage and its subsequent breakdown are clearly illustrated:

See on the chart, there's a big dip after I got married. And it shoots up after I left my husband! I'm in a lot better place now, although I'm skint.

Similarly F2 has experienced a divorce and she explains that in some way that has galvanised her to reconsider her future and enact some changes in her life. In her words:

I got divorced. Well, we split up just before I had my daughter, and even though I didn't come to college then, it did push me to want to do things. And I did, I went up and I got better jobs and things like that. I think it does change you, doesn't it? I think it changes your attitude to what you think you can do. Because you think, 'oh, I'll go out and I'll show him. I'll show him what I can do' don't you?

Participant M1 explained that he had spent ten years working in the security industry and that his former girlfriend was highly educated having undertaken a PhD at an institution in Norwich. In his words:

Watching her sort of made me get the bug and realise that there is more to life than just work really... I'd like to be able to get up in the morning and be able to say that I enjoy what I'm doing.

M2 reported a very similar experience of a now former girlfriend who had attended university while he had not and the impact this relationship breakdown had had on him and triggering his desire to pursue HE. In his words:

I split up with my girlfriend after a long period a few months before. She'd been through university and she was just finishing. So it kind of gave me a massive boot up the backside, to put it in those sorts of terms. Because I thought well what am I doing with my life? I was working in a dead end job, if you want to put it that way. My girlfriend was, at the time, doing well. So I just thought when we broke up well what am I doing? So, that is what kind of led me to think, oh, it's time.

A number of participants discussed break-ups as having created feelings and circumstances that cultivated their reengagement with education. F10 reported multiple changes in her life situation triggered by a relationship breakdown that ultimately facilitated her undertaking the access course:

I left my job, I split up with my partner and moved back with my parents. And the time was right, I had the support at home. I was changing jobs and it meant that I could work my job around a college course so it was just the right time.

Participant F20 spoke at length about her experiences of a cataclysmic change in circumstance and that again for her this ultimately resulted in engaging with the access course:

I'd thought about doing this course 2 years ago and me and my, well, he's my ex now, we weren't very stable. He was constantly walking out on me and the children and going back to his mother. So I just thought, there's no way I can give up my job to do this when I knew that he wasn't fully supporting me. He wasn't right behind me - I couldn't rely on him. So when we did finally split up then, I decided not to take the job in Cardiff, so then it was sort of like a voluntary redundancy. So I just thought well perhaps this is the kick I need to, you know, to do it. So I, I was made redundant last February and I had a couple of months off then with the children. And enrolled last September for this course then. Yeah, it's weird it has come together. Three major things happened: moving, my job and my ex. And then all of a sudden I find myself in college and it's great.

Similarly F18 spoke of a relationship breakdown having changed her thinking and spurred on her engagement:

I'd split up with my partner at the time and I thought, I just really didn't want to be a single parent and living on benefits for the rest of my life. And, I'm 27 so obviously I'm getting on a bit. And I just thought well I'm going to do it, I'm going to do something.

Speaking about her former partner, the father of her son, F19 explained how he does not understand her undertaking the course and the pressures she faces. She went on to say that if they were together she would not be undertaking the course. In her words:

My son's father, he'd always say, you got a day off now and you're going to go over there [to college] to do work. And it's like well it needs to be done. If it's not done I may as well just quit the course now. He doesn't realise it.

Several participants reported on the positive impacts current relationships have had on their reengagement with education. F7 described taking turns to work and undertake courses with her current partner so they could each gain an education before they "go on to the next level and have kids and that responsibility". Another participant, F8, described that her current partner had offered her the opportunity to return to college in exchange for them relocating back to South Wales following a move to the Midlands. In her words:

He dangled that carrot because he knew I'd always wanted to come back to education. He said he'd support me and so he said if you move

back with me you can go off to college. A bit of blackmail but it did me a favour.

In the context of her own marriage, participant F4 described the longevity of it and how her engaging with the intensive access course had undeniably created some friction. As outlined in the following extract, she and her husband are managing to make adjustments within their own relationship to accommodate the new changes facing them:

He's always been used to me being there 24/7. I mean we've been married 25 years this May coming now and so you can imagine he's just used to me being around the place. I'm like an ornament aren't I? And so he was all for this then but when the work started coming in and I was like living on the computer. So like the trouble with me, if I've got something to do or I start a project it's all consuming. I'll let it totally consume me and I'm just on it any spare minute I've got. I'll do what I've got to do and then I'm just there. Everything else I just blank out. So that was causing problems, plus he was doing things that I would usually do as well so there was a slight role reversal going on. And it is settling down now. It is settling down. Because I just say I've got to do it because if I don't do it I won't pass and it's been for nothing.

The influence of others

A significant number of participants made reference to having been influenced/encouraged by a friend, relative or an individual in a professional capacity to engage with the access course.

Family

Participant F1 made reference to her late father having pushed her in school and as a result his passing made her reappraise her desire to further her education. (This was compounded by a divorce and intervention from a tutor as discussed below).

F2 reported having watched her sister recently graduate from university and having been encouraged by her to investigate routes back into higher education.

Participant F3 described having been “forced” to undertake the access course by her mother who herself previously undertook the course and is now a qualified nurse.

Respondent F6 made explicit reference to the pressure she received from her father to pursue an education and avoid the path he has followed. In her words:

My grandparents always told me they'd support me whatever I'd done. But my father, because he's been on the sick for so long, it's always been, 'you're not going to turn out like me. You're going to further education. You're going to pass. That is what you are going to do. You have no choice'.

Participant F8 outlined the encouragement she received from her parents and her partner both prior to engaging with the course and to-date.

F19 explained that she had discussed her career ambitions with her sister prior to investigating the access course.

Friend/non-family member

F7 described the encouragement she receives from her boyfriend's mother, a teacher by profession, who regularly asks for updates about her results on the access course and reportedly seems more proud of her than F7's own family.

F18 described having a close friend who is currently at university studying mental health nursing and thoroughly enjoying it. F18 explained this is something she would always liked to have done and hearing about her friend's experiences has inspired her.

Professional

Having undertaken a short course associated with her previous employment, F1 recounted having been encouraged by the course tutor to return to college. She expressed a desire to contact her former tutor and to thank her for acting as an inspiration.

M3 explained how he had enrolled on a university course but it had not been suitable for him. He cited having an excellent personal tutor who encouraged him to continue his journey back into education despite withdrawing from the HE programme and it was his tutor who told him about the existence of access courses.

F11 referred to "[her] lady in Genesis" having found out about the course for her rendering this participant one of the few directly referred by a professional agency.

Genesis is a (now defunct) Welsh Government programme aiming to support hard to reach groups to gain qualifications or to enter employment.

Discouraged by family

F9 described how her success at school triggered pressure from her family to stay in formal education and how this proved counterproductive. In her words:

None of my family were particularly intelligent, either side, and nobody had ever been to university, either side of my family. So when I was having the grades then, I wasn't the brightest child, but after I had my GCSEs, getting my results back, they said you've got to go. That was basically it. When they'd seen my GCSE results, they said you've got to and you will go. And it was from all angles as well, well you will. There was no, do you want to? You will.

Having not completed her subsequent exams and decided to withdraw from school, F9's family reportedly retracted their encouragement and now that she has returned to education, like to remind her of her non-completion at school which she is using as a vehicle to motivate herself. In her words:

Now they say 'oh you're not going to stick at. You'll quit a fortnight before like you did in school'. And that isn't happening. No Way.

Those participants who report being positively influenced by others to return to education cite mostly sources in a non-professional capacity. It is relevant to observe that there appears to be limited presence of influence in a professional capacity which begs the question, where is all of the careers advice and guidance when career advisers and formal agencies are supposed to provide all-age support.

Having a family

Having children is reported to have influenced a number of the participants to return to education, some purely in the context of circumstances and others more specifically in relation to setting a good example for their children as discussed in the following section on role models. Theorists such as Erikson (1963), Gould (1978), Lowenthal *et al.* (1975) and Vaillant (1977) write on the influence of such events in the context of stage theory and their impact on changing identity. In terms of the triggering effect of

having children in the context of this study, participant F5 described taking a career break after the birth of her son for example and participant F9 described having given birth to twins which resulted in crèche fees being prohibitively expensive and her leaving the workforce at the time. Participant F11 explained how her daughter is now at school and she decided to engage with the course as of September because she does not wish to sit at home for the duration of the school day waiting for her daughter to return for company. While F11 described the impact of her daughter attending primary school and seeking to fill that void, participant F13 explained that the age of her own children (a 17 year old son and a daughter starting comprehensive) makes this the right time for her to pursue her career. F14, a mother of three teenage children, explained that each of her offspring inspire her with all they have achieved and she does not wish to be left behind by them. In her words:

I felt as if I was just at a junction and that I didn't have no way to go. They were all just going and leaving me behind. You know.... What was I going to do or what can I do? What am I capable of doing?

This sense of watching her children flourish and seeking to fill a void spurred her decision to investigate undertaking a return to education. This emotion links directly with a sense of role redundancy as conceptualised by Walters (2002) in her tripartite model of mature students reengagement.

F17, the only participant who expressed uncertainty about her future plans and a mother of a one year-old daughter, expressed some regret about the timing she has chosen to undertake the course around her family commitments (unlike the other participants who feel satisfied that they have timed their return to learning around the life stages of their children). In her words:

I thought if I came now, by the time she was in school then I would be qualified. But then obviously I didn't realise how much I would be missing out while you know from naught to three is like the most important, well I thought it wouldn't have been. I thought that like when she is in school and everything you can play with them then but no, now is the most important but I've missed it now so it's a bit late.

Participant F18 explained that her own daughters are aged five and nine and as a consequence they are more self-sufficient than younger children would be. As a single parent she reported that managing them and the course expectations is challenging but

that it is beneficial that they are slightly more independent. She reported that she begins her coursework once she has put the children to bed at eight o'clock and then works into the night.

Role models

The notion of being a willing role model through educational engagement emerged as a powerful driver for a number of the female participants. Although this was not specifically linked with the concept of generativity in all cases in terms of improving the lot of the next generation, this was certainly associated with providing positive examples for the next generation. All the participants who spoke of acting in a role-model capacity implied this was negotiated voluntarily and not forced upon them in any way.

F1, a mother of two, spoke at some length about how positive she perceives it to be that her children can witness her studying and working towards a goal. In addition she made reference to setting an example herself that counters an ethic of non-working that she perceives pervades the local community. In her words:

My children are only nine and ten so I think it is good for them to see me in education as well. Because if I get into university next year my daughter is going to be starting comprehensive at the same time. I think it is nice for them to see because where I live, there's not a lot of people who work. Where I live there are sort of three generations of benefits claimants. They wouldn't know how to work if somebody gave them a job would they? I mean, we live in the same sort of places. And I don't want my children being like that. I want them to see me doing something. I've always wanted my children to see me working for something, aiming for something. And I think well, I want to support mine and tell them to work hard. I want them to know that they can do anything they want to do.

Participant F2 expressed a similar view about setting an example by undertaking study herself and countering examples potentially set in the wider community:

My daughter is thirteen and she seems to have picked up on her schoolwork a bit more since I've come back. Because when I'm sitting doing my homework, she will sit and do her homework by the side of me. Because where I live, there's not a lot of people who work. And I'm the same as F1, I think we both live in deprived areas where

there's not a lot of people in work and I think they could be the sort of children who fall into that role couldn't they really? I want mine to have aspirations. You know my son has, he wants to get out of Merthyr.

The notion of F2's son securing qualifications and aspiring to leave the local area is potentially reflective of a wider, longer-term crisis facing the local region. F2 extended her explanation to describe her own circumstances and drive to succeed and avoid welfare support to inspire and set an example for her own children:

I've never been on benefits. I've always worked full-time as well, and I've only been able to do that because I've had support from my parents I suppose, but they always worked. And my grandparents both worked as well. So I think it is the work ethic as well that you put into them as well isn't it that makes them see there is something else and that they don't have to stay in the situation that they are in.

Building on the idea of setting an example, F5 explained her long-held perception that education is important and how she has always strived to encourage her daughter to pursue education in order to secure a "good position in life".

M1, although not a father himself, spoke of wishing to positively influence those growing up in the area of Merthyr Tydfil. He engages in volunteer work like a number of the other participants and is looking to undertake courses run by the borough to qualify in counselling to address topics such as drug addiction and supporting the bereaved.

F9, although seemingly dispassionate about her past lack of ambition, spoke very strongly about her desires for her own children. She contextualised how she had gone to the navy and the feelings she possessed on her return:

I wanted to go to the navy. That's all I ever wanted to do. And I went, and I didn't like it. So when I came back it was like, well, what do I do now? And that's when I went to [mobile phone shop]. But I think having the children makes you realise how you've gotta shape up. You've gotta show them the right way really. I didn't want them working down there and saying oh 'mam works there so it's all right for me to do it. It's all right'. The money's all right but it's not, it's not a job.

F10 who had also worked at the same mobile phone shop described having been told repeatedly that she would never go anywhere or be anything and that a job in the mobile phone shop was the best she could hope for. In discussing her aim for undertaking the access course she explained:

I wanted to be able to show my son that I could do it on my own and I didn't need to rely on anybody else. I am doing this course so I can hopefully go on to university and get a career and then provide a better life for us both. I was happy plodding along and then I had my son and then I think your perspective changes then.

Participant F11 reported a similar change in perspective since having her daughter coupled with a desire to demonstrate to her that she is capable of pursuing a university education rather than remaining on benefits:

At the moment I'm on benefits... before I was on this course I was looking at going back into work when my daughter was at school part-time. To work part-time and I got my own house and the rent and it is easier to go on benefits and I didn't want my daughter then to grow up and think oh well I could sit down all day and watch TV like many people do. It is easy, just get paid for doing nothing. But then you get labelled but it weren't as if I was scrounging for years and years and years. It was only the three years since my daughter was born. I was thinking that 'no I will show people wrong, that just because I'm a single parent you can do...' That's what I want my daughter to see more than anything, to think 'well, I was on my own and I still done a full-time course and well hopefully, touch wood, go to university for three years'.

Respondents F16, F21 and F22 all expressed similar views about engaging with the course in order to transform their lives and be role models for their children.

In the words of F16:

I wanted [my son] to think right, it doesn't matter how long it takes but you work, if you've got enough ambition and goals you will actually achieve what you want to do. So I just wanted him to have something to look up to. To think well my mother's done it at her age and I just wanted to show him really that if you do well then you can achieve what you want to do. That's really why I did it.

F21 reported that the birth of her daughter made her reappraise her employment prospects. She stated:

Having my daughter basically gave me the kick up the a*\$e to say stop drifting from job to job. I've been a lifeguard basically and a swimming teacher, and I thought that's not the sort of career, that's not a proper career. I wanted to do teaching and I thought if I don't do it now I'm never going to do it. I've been thinking of the future like I'll have school holidays off with my daughter and stuff. I know this is the right time to do it.

F22 stated clearly her desire to set an example for her son by furthering her own education:

I want to show my son that you should go to uni and show him how to get a professional job, not just leave school and do something just for the money like in a factory or something. I want him to further his education and I think the only way I'm going to do that is by doing it myself and showing him.

Death

Death and specifically the loss of a parent or loved one is identified as a key influencer by theorists such as Lowenthal *et al.* (1975) and Neugarten (1968) in relation to the development of identity. 13 of the participants noted death(s) on their critical life paths as having shaped their lives. However, in terms of the focus group data, only four participants made explicit reference to death as being a key direct influence on their decision to engage with the access course. Both F1 and F19 cited the death of a parent as having made them reappraise their personal circumstances and need to pursue additional qualifications. In the words of F1:

My father died when I was forty and that, that changed me forever that did. I did start really thinking about things then. My father did used to push me to do well in school you know and when he died I thought, I wished I'd have gone to university. I wish he had seen me in a cap and gown. You know, I wanted to make him proud.

When discussing the impact of the death of her mother who passed away 16 months prior to the interview, F19 said:

When my mother was ill I quit work and everything because I was looking after her and then when she died and I had a baby I was just like she would be so proud of me if I'd done that and I think, I don't know I just think it's stemmed from that really. It was just random it was, I was just like well she'll be proud of me if I'd done that so I looked into it and done it.

Both participants strongly conveyed the sense of the pride their late parents would have felt to witness them studying and articulated this as a key trigger for their return to learning. This pride that participants show in their achievements as would have been viewed by their late parents represents a potentially new way of interpreting generativity. Marks *et al.* (2007) highlight that the impact of parental death on adult psychological wellbeing is not extensively understood. Their work draws on Elder (1998) who argues that the loss of a parent represents an important transition in the life course.

As a supplement to the motivation triggered by a perceived sense of pride, F19 described how moved she had been when watching the Macmillan nurses providing palliative care for her mother and this had also inspired her to wish to become a nurse herself.

Discussing the impact of the death of somebody from a different perspective, F8 described how the son of a family friend had committed suicide while they were at school. This death prompted her own parents to stop pressuring her for fear that she too would be pushed too far. As a result she expressed that this more relaxed approach to educational accomplishment from her family encouraged her to prioritise happiness over achievement but that now in her words, she realises that “happiness doesn’t pay bills”, hence engagement with the access course in her adult life.

A fourth participant, F24, expressed a fear that members of her family would pass on in the near future, in particular her grandparents who had raised her. She anticipated being left alone and the need to, in her words, “benefit herself”. Her anticipation of the impact of death was a key influencer for her own engagement with access.

Illness/health issues

Six of the participants expressly discussed the impact of illness and health issues on their engagement with access provision. Two spoke of their own personal health challenges while the other four described the impact of ill health in those around them.

M4 discussed the severe anxiety issues that he experiences. He explained that when at work he was unable to attend team meetings as he could not sit in a room with colleagues and that he would spend days agonising whenever a new meeting date was announced. He described how “[he] always had to be stood up or by the door and because of that everyone else was kind of like, who is this freak?!”. He explained what a hurdle it has been for him to engage in a classroom environment on the access programme. He described that he joined the course a week late as he needed to work himself up to being able to sit in a room with fellow students.

M5 explained the significant health issues he has had to try to overcome following a stroke three years ago that resulted in the loss of his memory. This is his third attempt at completing the access course as ongoing health issues have forced him to withdraw twice before. He described that his health is the reason he has had to get back into education. In his words, “hopefully I’ll be lucky this time around and finish the course and get back into university and get on with my life and what I want to do”.

F24 witnessed her grandfather, with whom she lives, in a critical condition following a heart attack and the uncertainty about whether he would survive made her want to go to university to be able to support herself (as referenced in the above section on death). The mother of F23 developed breast cancer when F23 was 15 and this turned into a long health struggle. F23 reported that her exam results suffered as a result as her mother’s illness affected her concentration and priorities. In her words, “I thought that nothing else mattered. It was just all about living life and keeping myself happy but now I realise. I’m hoping to finish here and then go on to university”.

F18 described that her mother suffered extensively with mental health issues before she died. She reported being the only member of her family who was able to anticipate the onset of these mental health episodes and this sensitivity has been a factor in influencing her decision to pursue the access course with a view to progressing to a career in mental health nursing.

M2 alluded to his father's mental health issues and although this has not directly impacted upon his decision to engage with access provision, it is reportedly influencing where he applies to university as he acts as his father's carer.

Life path

When discussing their participation and reflecting on the completion of their life path charts, the students offered a number of supplementary comments expanding on and alluding to the influences that have resulted in their current ambitions and engagement with the access course.

F1 explained that for her, three things converged in order to spark her engagement with the access course: leaving her husband; a tutor encouraging her and a friend who she worked for warning her that her job would unfortunately no longer be available once her friend retired.

In her words:

All of this combined and I thought well, you know, I'm going to have to do it. I wish I had done it a long time ago but it wasn't the right time then.

When discussing how she would tackle the life path chart, F2 observed:

From naught to eleven I was sort of on an even keel. Can I just put a straight line for that because I was happy then!

When outlining the epiphany that made her resign from her previous employment, F2 explained:

Something snapped in work. I think we had a visit from somewhere and when they came in I thought, 'I can't do this anymore'. And then I wrote my resignation letter while they were still in the building and I gave it to them and there was just literally this spur of the moment think like that.

F2 qualified the description of her spontaneous decision by saying she had found her position unrewarding for some time and that she knew she wanted to undertake work she classified as more fulfilling. Analysis of her interview narrative also highlights the

influence of acting as a role model for her children and the impact her divorce had on her sense of wishing to prove something.

F4 explained that she had been working as a dinner lady in a large primary and what prompted her return to learning was seeing flyers for courses that members of staff could attend.

When F5 started charting her career path she commented:

I went up the career ladder. I got from cashier to assistant manager. I just felt that I didn't want to progress any further within financial services. So I think that was the end for me you know. So that's why I've moved. I spent eleven years in the banking industry and after having my second child I felt that I wanted to take a completely new direction. I've always been passionate about learning disabilities. My nephew has learning disabilities. And my daughter went down for an open day down the university and I saw an opportunity there to do learning disability nursing. So it was from that point on.

Reflecting on his life to-date when completing the life path exercise, M1 took a somewhat rhetorical view on his path:

Sometimes it feels as if you just can't explain it. I mean for me, I couldn't really sit down and analyse right this is the direction I took and this is why I took it. I've just followed a path and this is just another part of the journey. This is where I've come to. I'm glad I've been to where I've been to otherwise I wouldn't be who I am today. I wouldn't have found that even at this point in life this is the path that I want to take.

Looking back at her life path and discussing how she had eschewed going to university at the age of 18, F12 observed:

I would never have been able to do this when I was 18. Never in a million years. I would never have been able to pick myself up out of school at 18 and go to university. I wouldn't have been ready. I wasn't worldly enough. Like I've got so much more experience now of everything and I think that that accounts for a lot of it. I wouldn't... now was the right time. 10 years ago wouldn't have been. Definitely. I didn't choose what I ended up doing. I think it chose me.

Participant F20 described how only very recently she had been reflecting on how her circumstances have changed and the disbelief she feels about her current educational aspirations:

Well on Friday and Saturday night last week actually the children were there in the house playing, watching telly, so I just thought 'oh, well I'll get on, I'll do a bit of work'. And I remember sitting and thinking, it is Saturday night and I'm doing a biology assignment and if somebody had told me that a year ago I would have said to them 'don't be daft'.

F20 explained that the voluntary redundancy she took from her previous role spurred her to consider pursuing a change of career. In her words:

I think I had always wanted to do it but you just think it is one of them things that you'll never actually do. But, being made redundant was the kick up the backside that I needed really. Because otherwise I would have plodded along I probably would have been there until retirement.

When reviewing her life path participant F17 reportedly shocked herself by having omitted to mention her parent's divorce when she was 16:

When she left my father I think I was about 16. Oh I didn't put that on there! But that didn't affect me so there's no point in putting it down. I will just add it. It was ok. I wasn't really bothered. I can't believe that I genuinely just forgot that my parents had a divorce.

Participant F19 demonstrated a particular level of personal resilience when reflecting on her life path. Despite having been given away by her birth mother when she was two days old and having recently nursed her terminally ill adoptive mother (her biological grandmother) she reflected on her life saying:

I don't have any really low points. When I broke up with [my boyfriend], but it wasn't that low. It's only a boyfriend isn't it? I had a lush upbringing I've got to be honest. It was lucky I was given away.

Student M3 reflected on how turbulent his life has been since leaving school having already attempted to reengage with education and that finally he feels as though his life is somewhat more settled now:

Where to begin? When I left school I went to college and left home at the same time. It was really difficult to be able to stay and be able to

live on your own. I dropped out of college and started working. I went back to college again and then dropped out again. I managed to find my way to a local university but that didn't go too well because of personal reasons really. To be honest this is the most stable I've been, being on this course, for quite a while now. I'm not perfect but I'm getting along with this course and hopefully it's the way forward for me now.

Respondent M4 described his initial return to education four or five years ago and reflected back on his emotions and the different aspects of his personal history that have resulted in him undertaking the current access course. One particular event, the opportunity to invigilate an exam, served as a turning-point for him in the context of his wider experiences:

I did a foundation degree at a local institution going back about four or five years ago now. But where I was at, my environment I was living in, I was caring for somebody as well and I hadn't done anything for 15 years. I ended up working for a local college and the university and the thing that actually helped me the most was being sent in to invigilate an exam once. About 10 or 11 years ago and actually being sat at the front of the class, even though it was stone cold silence, because I had that little element of control, over my situation, I had to be there, it kind of helped me a lot and that started me thinking, massive irony at play, how I left school with no qualifications and I ended up working in higher education departments.

As demonstrated across this theme, all of the individual life paths are very varied and a number of unique events and influences have converged to shape each personal learning journey despite some commonality of trajectory in terms of undertaking the access course.

6.6 Undertaking the course: from recruitment and application to ongoing engagement and views on education

Despite students having undertaken the decision to participate in the access course, their learner trajectories nevertheless remain ongoing, with catalysts and triggers continuing to influence and shape their reengagement journeys, interactions and future aspirations. Students offered reflective insight in relation to how they had heard about the course, on the experience of doing the course, around applying to

university, on the impact of the course on instilling a sense of self-belief and more generically in terms of their views on teaching and education.

How students heard about the course

In terms of how students had heard about the course, the majority of participants reported that they had researched course options themselves and had proactively discovered and applied for the access programme. A few respondents described having heard about the course through friends or family and a very small proportion described having been advised about the access route having instigated or engaged in contact with professional agencies.

In terms of making direct enquiries, a number of students described having gone online to search for options or to having got hold of prospectuses for local institutions, some reportedly over a period of several years while building up their nerve to apply.

Participants such as F1, F5 and M1 all described having researched the course themselves by looking online and then having followed this up by contacting the college and on deciding that access was the right route for them, making an application. In the words of M1: “I just researched it myself and after I looked through the college manual I thought this was probably the best opportunity for me to progress where I want to go”. The notion that the course would directly lead on to meet ambitions of applying to university resonated with the majority of participants.

Participant F4 described having researched the course and explicitly stating that she did not know of anybody who had ever done the course. Participant F2 described having been motivated by her sister’s recent university graduation and this encouraged her to look into returning to education. She reported initially having contacted a local university to investigate doing a foundation course but due to her lack of A-levels she was referred to the access route. The level of proactivity evidenced by these individuals can be interpreted as demonstrative of their conscious commitment to reengage.

F6 described having wanted to return to education but not being sure what to do. Her grandparents reportedly picked up a college prospectus on her behalf and she identified the access course that way. Similarly the mother of F7's boyfriend found out about the course on her behalf and provided her with the relevant information and application forms. F8 described having heard about the course from a friend who was undertaking access in England and this prompted her to research comparable programmes locally in South Wales.

Participants F9, F10 and F11 all heard about the access course through varying professional agencies. F9 reported being involved in a scheme entitled School Gates via her daughter's school that she likened to the Genesis programme. This programme is an employment support initiative run by the Department for Work and Pensions. The programme reportedly involved her undertaking a lot of written work and the organisers were described as quite "pushy", repeatedly asking her why she was doing her current role and not something else. They then followed this up by telling her about the access programme which she researched further. F10 described having approached the careers advice service in the town centre and having explained her nursing ambitions to them. They responded by telling her about access which she then located the brochures for and pursued directly with the college. F11 described having been referred to a course similar to Genesis as she was a single parent and, having explained her desire to become a nurse, they also steered her to access as a route into university.

Similar to participant F4, F12 described having researched the access course and despite not having known anybody who had undertaken the programme, decided to apply in order to fulfil her nursing ambitions. She reported that when she attended the interview, the course tutor really "sold" the programme to her, and she does not regret her decision to apply on this basis. She also described having previously attended an open day at a local HEI several years before and having researched the possibility of undertaking a foundation course. In addition she stated she had got a prospectus from the local college every year for a number of years but despite having looked at it annually, had not applied until the current intake of access. Similar to F12, F20 also described having received a prospectus annually for several years prior to applying.

F13 described her son's debate about whether to leave school or to attend college and how this prompted her to collect a prospectus. Having discovered the access course this way and decided to apply, she reported subsequently bumping into an old school friend by chance and learning that she too was planning to undertake the access course in the same cohort.

Participant F14 described having a friend who had already undertaken the access programme and recommended it to her. This route is more strongly reflective of the perspective offered by the access tutors in chapter 5 that word of mouth recruitment is the strongest vehicle to attract students.

F15, who was already proactively engaging in an adult education course locally, heard about the access programme from her current course tutors and proceeded to research her options from that point.

F16 explained that once she had decided to pursue a change of career she made an appointment with a careers advisor to discuss her options and from this point she investigated the college website to learn more about how to pursue employment in the nursing profession.

Respondents F17, F18 and F19 all reported having looked at local college options to investigate potential routes into higher education and all had come across the access programme and made the decision to apply.

Participant M2 reported having made an appointment to see a careers advisor and that while helpful, they had not directed him to access but simply advised that he look to undertake A-levels. It was only when he subsequently consulted the college brochure that he discovered the access route and investigated it further.

Participant M4 reported having undertaken a number of short courses and it was through a fellow short course participant that he learned about the access route back to higher education and this prompted him to research the avenue further and to make an application.

Respondents M5, M7 and F24 all reported (independently) having visited the college and being told about the access route by a tutor and this resulted in their applications.

Participants F21 and F23 described having proactively researched the course having decided to return to education. F22 reported that her mother had informed her about the access route and M6 explained that his wife made him aware of the access programme as she herself had undertaken it several years previously.

The experience of doing the course

All of the participants spoke at length about the experience of undertaking the access course. The majority reported on how intense the course is and how much work is involved, reflecting the observations of the access tutors outlined in chapter 5. Every participant described how beneficial it is to be part of the cohort which is a very supportive environment and a significant number of participants expressed a view that if it had not been for the positive relationship with their fellow students they would have withdrawn from the programme by now and in the words of several students, “given up”. The majority of students followed up their comments about the challenges they are facing with statements about how they still perceive the experience as a positive one and most importantly, a crucial stepping stone in helping them to achieve their goals.

Students expressed the following sentiments about the challenges of participating:

It's hard though isn't it like? You leave school to doing nothing at all and then coming back here. It's like spelling and stuff like that. (F3).

It is very intense the course. It is challenging but I am really enjoying it. It is like mental aerobics. It is a good experience even though it is very demanding. And it takes a lot of your time up, even when you're not in college as well. It has got to be looked at as a positive though hasn't it? (F4).

It was scary the first day. I was sat in the car park thinking what am I doing! It is hard. But it isn't for that long. I just think, I don't even put it in my head that I can quit if I wanted to. For me it's not even an option do you know what I mean? I just think I've got to do it. (F8).

It is time consuming. I work in the evenings and on the weekends, it's trying to find free time to do the work as well as see my family and

have a social life. It is difficult but then we were all saying at Christmas time, we were all sitting there with greasy hair and whatever, it would be so nice just to go and wash your hair and have a bath. It's just stuff like that to be honest but then I'm thinking well it's 5 months and then it's the rest of my life. I am determined to finish it. (F10).

It's just intense. Intense because of all the deadlines I think. I'm enjoying it, it's just that it's intense isn't it? I cried last night and it is because we want it. We want to do well. We've got a really nice group. Everyone is really nice. I wouldn't give it up for nothing now. I've definitely got to finish the course. My friends have said that to me now, that you're a different person because you're so engrossed in your work. I don't see them much now, don't have time to. (F13).

The idea that friends are witnessing a change in the behaviour of these students as illustrated in the above quotation is indicative of the transformation resulting from participation. As a measure of the commitment these students feel to their new paths, F20 articulates:

When we first started the course the tutor said look around now because there will be a lot who will drop out. The people who are with you now won't necessarily all be here at the end. And I remember thinking 'there's no way I'm going to give up. I'm not going to give up no way'. And it was only the other day, well, one day this week, that I was thinking, I'm surprised though. I'm not surprised I haven't given up because that was never, that would never have entered my head. But I can't believe how much I've done since I started. I really didn't think I was capable of it you know. Before I leave the house to do the school run in the morning I feel like I've done a 12- hour shift. But then it's nice to just come here then and to forget about the children. (F20).

Several female participants spoke of how particularly challenging the course is for them as they need to balance their coursework around caring for their children and running the home. In their words:

I had to give up my job you know to come here, because I just couldn't do the two you know. It is tough. And then you've got a kid in the corner going, "mum can you do this homework for me", and I'm going I've got my own homework. (F1).

I'm the same. I've got the children, I know they're a bit older, and I've been working as well so part-time but you know, it's hard work. But like I said you know, you've taken a lot just to get here in the first place so we've got to stick at it now. (F2).

What was the day this week where we had that tutor? Wednesday? I felt like I'd done 2 days on that day. I was that shattered. I was really tired. Physically and mentally tired. And you know you've got to go home and when you've seen to the kids and that, back on the computer then, making alterations, corrections, action plans coming out my ears... I find it really stressful trying to balance everything. (F4).

I was struggling the first term because it was all new. But now I'm finding it, well, I believe in myself. I think I can do it. But it has taken over my life. I've got two young children. It has literally taken over my life. Sometimes I am more interested in my work when I should be with them. I haven't got a good enough grasp to divide the two of them at the moment. It is a difficult balance to strike. And my husband works long hours so he is literally in and bed and back out to work in the morning. It is really, really hard. (F15).

My other half does long shifts. He's never there really because he's always in work. So therefore I've got the children on my own. So it is hard to try and juggle everything but I think as long as you sort of focus and you know your deadlines and you're giving yourself a bit of time. Because I do find sometimes I am still the night before still working on an assignment that has to be in the following day. That is just circumstances when you've got children but as long as you're prepared that that's what's going to happen. It is a lot of work, but enjoyable. (F16).

These extracts illustrate some of the challenges facing the individual participants in terms of balancing their academic work around their home and personal lives and yet despite the difficulties they face, they continue to persevere with their chosen trajectory of reengagement.

Students articulated the extent to which the cohort and relationships with their peers have continued to influence their participation and shape their learner journeys. In their words:

It's a nice group and I think we all support each other. We have all sort of clicked together and we do help each other out with our work. We get in touch with each other, email, you know if somebody needs help. (F2).

I've sacrificed a lot, I've given up work through the week to come and do it. I enjoy it. It is good to be around like-minded people. It is not like sixth form when half of them don't want to be there. With the access course people are here to learn and they want to go further. It motivates you. (M1).

I am enjoying the course. Don't get me wrong it's hard, but I think it is all right because we've got such a good group that we all sort of help each other out, that makes the course more bearable. (F6).

You do get times with certain essays that you'll be sat there looking at it thinking what am I supposed to be doing? But then because everyone is so close, especially us guys isn't it, we will just help each other out and then that just makes it easier. (F7).

We were lucky though because we all gelled pretty quickly. I just remember seeing you outside [F11] and saying will you walk in with me because I don't want to walk in on my own. And I think that was because I am on my own. (F10).

I think if you do A-levels you could get younger people and yourself and I think now we've got a mixture of ages. I think I would've gone by now if it weren't for the people on here. I won't quit. (F11).

Demonstrating some of the many emotional challenges these students faced as adult returners, F11 explained:

It's one thing to apply, but going. The worst was coming up to do our ID badges. I brought my daughter because I just needed some comfort. I thought I don't want to walk in there on my own. So I brought her with me just so I could talk to someone and not stand on my own.

I love the course. Not the workload, not the work, but... These people are going to be friends if well, if we get into the same uni then these people are going to be friends for the next three and a half years. And it makes you think. It's pushed us, it's pushed us to the limit and I know I've cried this week over my assignment and it's because we want it. If it wasn't for each other I think we would have given up a long time ago. Or turned to alcoholism. (F12).

F14 spoke at length about how the camaraderie within the cohort had encouraged her to persevere with the course:

To come in from like, none of us have got any GCSEs, so to come in and within 12 weeks, gain A-levels, you've just got to... it is really hard but the team that we've got, you know the group upstairs, the team that we've got you know we just help each other. I think if I was on my own as in on my own I think I would have walked by now. Definitely. I think we all laugh together but then we all help each other as well. So we go through all the emotions together and nobody is on their own. (F14).

Other participants expressed similarly positive sentiments:

It's great coming here, it's the best thing I could have done. There's a few girls on the course who, like, I'd worked with one of them but I hadn't seen them for a few years. So, like I knew a couple of them but you're just getting to know them better. Building friendships then as well. It's been great. It's lovely. (F20).

I think it helps a lot that you're with a more mature sort of class. I think that everyone is grown up, you haven't got any idiots, and there's plenty of them around here don't get me wrong. But our class, we're fortunate, it's nice to be in with the more mature, if you want to put it that way. Everybody helps each other if anyone's got any sort of problems, everyone's there to be like, 'are you all right?' So it's all good. We're a pretty close group as well. I think we've gelled really well our group. So it's good, it's helpful definitely. (M2).

Everybody is really helpful in our class I would say. They're really mature about it. Everybody... you know... basically leave no man behind, I guess sort of thing. (M3).

Getting into classes was a big step for me. I was pretty self-absorbed. And I think the factor for me is that there are so many people who have got more demands than I have with kids and various outside factors and commitments and it is really spurring me on. Because when I feel like I can't do something I stop and I consider someone else and I think if they're doing it with all this then I can do it and it is a big leveller and it has been really good. (M4).

Everyone is bringing in their own experiences of life and you know, you realise that everyone has got their own problems and then you meet new people and you think... it helps give you perspective. (M5).

There is a sense of being part of a group. We keep tabs on each other don't we? (F24).

We're a family! (F23).

The above quotations serve to illustrate the challenge of the course and the sense of camaraderie, which, alongside student support, is reportedly crucial to encouraging and securing ongoing participation and engagement.

Applying to university

All 31 participants spoke of the access course being a compelling qualification as it represents a direct route to university. They used phrases such as "fast track way into applying to university" (F4), "the fastest track into university" (F7) and "the quickest

way into university” (F9). It is evident that access is perceived as a necessary stepping-stone to allow these students to progress to higher education. All of the students except one discussed their ambitions to progress to degree courses in the autumn. This particular student (F17) reported finding herself confused and unsure about whether she wanted to pursue a nursing career and this therefore impacted on her decisions to study this particular subject at HE level, a debate compounded by the young age of her daughter, aged 12 months. In terms of the university application process, a significant majority of students raised this as a subject of discussion as their applications were foremost in their minds given many students were awaiting the outcomes of acceptance decisions.

A number of students expressed how strongly they felt about starting a university course in September, linking once again to the notion of a sense of ‘now or never’ outlined in section 6.4. In terms of applications to higher education institutions, students discussed their application decision-making process at some length with many explaining that childcare, family commitments, travel costs and logistics had influenced and in a number of cases, limited, where they applied. Proximity to home was a major factor for a number of students as illustrated by participant F1:

The stressful thing now is worrying whether we will get offered a place in university or not. Because as far as we are concerned we’ve got the children and our home is here, we can’t travel, we’ve only got the choice of two really. We couldn’t put five down. We can’t up sticks and just move half way across the country.

One student, F11, described how she had put several institutions as choices on the form but that she was “praying for the nearest one” as taking her daughter to school and getting to any of the other universities would be impossible for her. This approach is demonstrative of different pressures driving decisions than those facing the participants within the work of Hinton (2011) in terms of student mobilities.

One applicant, F12, described her fear of driving anywhere outside of what she referred to as her “comfort zone” and included Swansea and Cardiff, key sites for local universities, as areas she felt insecure driving around. She expressed a desire to overcome this anxiety for the sake of fulfilling her aspirations and in her words:

I get to the big roundabout by the flyover and then I start to panic. But then when I went to the open day I just thought well I've got to get over that fear because it's nothing really is it compared to, in the grand scheme of things.

The same student also expressed concerns about the cost of petrol and the expense of paying for car parking once they were studying at university. She indicated that a number of students had already discussed car sharing to reduce costs and that would influence where they decided to attend if they were accepted at multiple institutions.

When discussing his university applications, another student (M2) explained that he had made local applications not out of a fear to move away but because he acted as a carer for his father who suffers from mental health problems. In his words:

Yeah, like I said, I'm not, it's not really, I don't know, it's not as though I was afraid to kind of branch out either, it was, I don't know I just, I felt more comfortable probably just, I don't know, because I, I've got my family's situation, this and that. You know, my father is in need of a lot of help and stuff and you know I prefer not to be too far away because of that I suppose as well. Because it's easier to come back then from Cardiff or, because I, I, basically take care of my father so you know, it is easier for me if I am in Cardiff. I can come back as opposed to somewhere in England. So that bears some sort of influence on my decision. You know, as I say, it's not my decision to stay locally, it's to do with other factors. I've got to be in the house with him, I need to be there in regard, because of my father and stuff you know. It is easier for me to be closer to home.

Several students expressed how stressful they had found the application process and specifically how nerve-wracking the nursing entry exams had been. These students emphasised that they felt admissions should not be based solely on test results but that all students should also be interviewed as many of them would possess the qualities required for the nursing profession. One student (F2) applying for a nursing course explained how she felt she had received mixed messages from an admissions tutor and the outcome of the application process:

It is like we did an assessment test, X is the university that you need to do an assessment test for and when one of the admissions tutors came up to do a talk here in the college he said, I'm not interested in the people with straight A's. I am looking for the person with personality and you know, those people are the ones that have got the qualities that I am looking for in a nurse. But then, they turned us down at the

assessment test point. And I'm thinking, well, how can you say that, that he's not looking for academics when you don't even know us. You know... But when you've heard him saying that it's not based on academics you know, we need to meet you, I'm thinking well how can you turn us down at the assessment point? You know...

In terms of getting to university, the majority of the participants expressed a strong desire to be accepted on the degree courses they had applied for. One student (F1) stated she would be "devastated" if she did not get offered a place this year. F1 and F2, who were interviewed together, both expressed a strong desire to progress straight to higher education and spoke at length about the application process. They reflected that although they had not yet received acceptance letters, they had managed to avoid being rejected at the initial application stage and they perceived this as a big achievement in itself. The pressure of striving for acceptance reportedly constantly plays upon them and helps them keep up the impetus with their access coursework.

Participant F3 explained that prior to undertaking the access course she had never written an essay or engaged in similar academic work so she perceived it was beneficial preparation for HE.

Building on the urgency expressed by a number of participants about their desire to progress immediately to higher education, this view was reiterated by F11 who stated, "I've just got to get into uni, I'm not asking much" and F14 who said, "I just want uni so much".

A male participant, M2, highlighted the appeal of the access course as a one-year programme and described that if he had found himself two years away from university that would have been too much now he had decided to embark on this educational journey. In his words:

I didn't want to be in the situation where I was two years away from going to university. I mean I was feeling as though I had wasted, well not wasted you know, but time was passing so I wanted to get into university. I chose this course, the same as M3 because it was intense for a year and it gets you where you want to be.

This represents a perspective, once again, capitalising on the sense of urgency felt by so many of the participants and highlighting the compelling appeal of access courses as a vehicle for accessing higher education.

Instilling self-belief

The development of self-confidence emerged as a key outcome of the course and proved to be an important point of reflection for some students, sometimes in regard to the course and in other cases, more widely. In terms of the notion of instilling self-belief, participants alluded to this from a range of perspectives and this theme echoes the work of Dominice (1990) and Walters (2000) encapsulating regeneration.

Participant F1 spoke of wanting her children to know they could do anything they wanted to do and providing them with a sense of security and belief in their own abilities.

Participant F2 described the confidence that she has developed through her years in employment that has resulted in feeling ready to embark on her journey back into education and towards a new career.

Participant F4 described herself as feeling increasingly “brave” as she started to tackle her numeracy skills and that this made her feel better about herself and increased her confidence and enabled her to make the access course application. She expressed a view that education is paramount globally due to the sense of self-worth it can offer people and the positive impact it can yield on their self-esteem.

Several students including F12 and F13 articulated that while they feel more confident as a result of having undertaken the access course, they are dreading having to deliver oral presentations to their peers. The link between developing confidence, employability and presentation skills was mentioned by a significant majority of the tutors in chapter 5.

In reflecting on her own sense of self-worth, F15 explained:

It's believing in myself. I really, really didn't believe I could do this. Because I think more than anything the teachers made me believe that I couldn't do it. It's still going on now. I now believe anybody, if you've got enough drive inside of you, anybody can do it. Because I'm not academic, but I'm getting on fine within this course.

Building on the comment of F15, F16 proposed:

It's confidence building though isn't it? Having the confidence to think that you can do it, that you are not as dull as they try to make out.

Reflecting on her own sense of achievement F20 explained:

I don't think you realise until you push yourself what you can do.

Three participants spoke directly about the impact of the course on their sense of self-confidence. In their words:

My confidence definitely is improved I think. My confidence was perhaps knocked out of me I think with breaking up because you know it does when you finish a long-term relationship. But I think the course has helped a lot with that. I've been interacting with different people and we have got to do presentations and stuff. You've got to have your confidence and I think it has helped a lot with that. (M2).

You build your confidence in your work and your work ethic. Basically it is like you're ready for university 100%. Confidence, that is the main thing that it boosts this course. Definitely. (M3).

Mine has really, really grown. I used to be really shy. I used to, when I started level 2, I was really nervous, I was worried about making friends on the course. I was like one of them ones who was on my own all the time. But I think that was more from school because I didn't finish. So I didn't get involved with the last year and do all the GCSEs and stuff so my like growing up was more outside of the school. But then coming back then, so then when you come back in you've got to get back into the way of like school basically and you've got to well, after like say a month or two I was fine then. It all came back to me and I've just grown in confidence ever since then. It showed me how academic I really was. I didn't really know. I thought, because I got kicked out and everything I thought I wasn't capable... I come on this course then I realised how I can do this and I am academic. (F22).

For these students and others, reengagement is reported to have directly impacted upon their possession of self-confidence and more widely on their sense of self-esteem.

Views on teaching/education

When reflecting on the value of education, F6 expressed a view that the rapport between student and educator is crucial to facilitate educational success, expressing a similar sentiment to the tutors in chapter 5:

I think [education] is worthwhile but it can be difficult because obviously you need to have that kind of connection with your tutor or lecturer to be able to go to them when you do need help and if you don't feel that you are confident in your teacher then you will fail in education. But in general I do think [education] is a really good thing.

F8 stated clearly her view on the priority of education:

You've got to learn, everybody. Our doctors have had to, everyone, you've got to learn haven't you?

Highlighting her negative connotations between education and school F11 explained:

I think when you think of education you think of school don't you? I think as soon as you think education you think 'ah, back to school it is', but it's not, this ain't nothing like school. It's just that word, I just didn't like that word. I don't know why, it's just a bit of a thing for me! I don't like it.

Participant F12 explained how she perceives education as key:

I think education is very important and that was instilled into me by my parents. It was, 'you have to go to school' because if you don't go to school, not so much if you don't go to school you won't get a good job but that, because they didn't have because they didn't go to school much. They just wanted the best and I think that if I had kids that I would make sure that they had a good education because I think it is important.

Similarly student F13 expressed a view that she perceives education as being very important and a sense of regret that she did not acknowledge this at a younger age. Building on this, participant F16 explained her attitude to education is much more mature now than when she was younger and that she did not foresee the consequences of not engaging while enrolled in compulsory schooling. F18 reported the same experience of immaturity at the age of 15. F17 expanded on this by saying:

If we think about when we were in school, we realised, well I reckon if I realised that, if I knew I was going to have to do so much learning now I would have stayed on in school and actually done better.

Reflecting on the difference between school and undertaking the access course at college, F23 emphasised that the key difference is associated with the environment and the fact that at college she perceives students are treated like adults.

When synthesised, the diversity of perspectives around education and schooling offer insight into the range of influences and nuances that have shaped these individual learner trajectories.

6.7 Conclusions in relation to catalysts and triggers

In summary, in relation to the theme of wider environmental issues, a number of relevant findings emerge. It is evident that an awareness of the socio-economic status of the region impacts upon decisions to participate and vocational necessity is a strong influence for a number of participants' engagement decisions. In addition, wider circumstances related to the current state of the economy and the historical development of the region resulting in industrial decline and high levels of unemployment (amongst others) have a direct impact on multiple levels on learner decisions to participate, influencing their past history and future aspirations.

In terms of the influence of compulsory schooling, authors such as Hammond and Feinstein (2006), McGivney (2001) and Sargant and Aldridge (2002) highlight the impact of initial schooling on subsequent participation in adult education and the findings in this study extend this discussion in a highly personalised context, identifying both constraining and enabling elements. An exploration of experiences of compulsory schooling sets the context for offering insight into subsequent educational engagement. A number of participants spoke of a traumatic transition from primary to secondary school. Some experienced a lack of family support, which they attribute to their lack of engagement or continued participation, while others perceived receiving positive support or at least pressure to attend from family. Mathematics features prominently in rendering school a traumatic experience for some and representing an ongoing hurdle to be overcome, a finding clearly articulated by the adult education tutors in chapter 5. Social aspects of schooling such as experiencing bullying,

socialising with non-engaged peers and rebelling played an influential role in shaping the lives of some participants.

Furthermore, some students described feeling constrained by elements of the school system such as subject choice while others felt deterred by a fear of examinations. In terms of negative experiences, some did not enjoy their compulsory schooling while others report not seeing the value of it – a view that has subsequently changed which is of central importance for this study. Others report not knowing there was a world outside of school and the local area that they required education to gain access to. Six learners place an element of culpability on their former teachers for having shaped their negative perceptions of learning and education.

Within the reengagement landscape conceptualised here as catalysts and triggers, students report and reflect on a number of different emotions including that of early ambition. In terms of ambition, a number of students spoke of having previously held ambitions and aspirations to attend university but that these plans had been derailed, in part due to circumstances earlier in their lives, negative school experiences and for some, a sense that they did not belong in higher education. Some students had not foreseen their return to education and some had envisaged their personal circumstances would never facilitate a return. A number of participants described the powerful juncture where return to education became feasible and then a reality. Nine participants spoke in terms of feeling a sense of regret: regret about not undertaking the access course sooner, regret in the delayed return path they have pursued and a sense of impairment having left school without qualifications, feelings that are now being resolved on return to education.

A significant number of participants expressed a sense of urgency associated with their decision to return to education via access. Several learners alluded to the appeal of the access programme as the qualification can be obtained within the period of one year as opposed to a longer time commitment. In the context of ‘now or never’, although the nagging sense of wishing to make a change was often present, one participant described having a ‘eureka’ moment in deciding to return while another, despite having reflected on joining the course for some time, felt their actual decision to participate was quite spontaneous. The majority of participants felt wholeheartedly

committed to their reengagement and almost afraid of not being 100% onboard. Participants communicated a sense of fear of losing their momentum if they did not engage both immediately and fully despite their clear passion and commitment to progress through the course and onto higher education programmes.

In terms of motivations to participate, the notion of generativity emerges as a powerful influence. A number of participants spoke indirectly of selfless motivations with ambitions to improve the lives of others, especially within the local area. Several participants reported reappraising their lives and associated motivations once having had children. One participant expressed a desire to stop being overshadowed by those already possessing qualifications. Many were motivated by a desire to improve their circumstances. Moreover, a desire for increased employability emerges as a clear theme across the participants as all 31 learners highlight vocational aspirations. Several participants inadvertently demonstrate an awareness of employability attributes through their discussion. Many participants distinguish between aspiring to have a career versus having just had jobs in the past. The majority of the participants report an employment history of low-skilled work in what many term ‘dead end’ roles. A number of participants describe the reasons behind their current engagement as linked to a search for fulfilling employment, having felt a sense of ‘settling’ in previous work.

The majority of learners express a sense of achievement and pride associated with being on the access course. Several participants communicate a sense of success associated with the start of their reengagement journeys while for example undertaking level 1 and 2 numeracy courses and preparation courses for adult returners. Participant F7 conceptualises aiming for something “higher” and “better” by returning to education and this encapsulates the sentiments of what many are seemingly striving for in terms of their own education, future and circumstances. Several participants describe taking part and “walking through the door of the course” as constituting success, embodying the views of the passionate adult education tutors explicated in the previous chapter.

The power of having money emerges as a key influence in the early lives of participants. A number report having previously felt that just earning a wage was

sufficient. For some earning money derailed or diverted their ambitions. Participants report that with age comes a growing awareness that obtaining additional education can yield more fulfilling work and lead to higher wages hence engagement with the access course. In terms of specific influencing events, relationship breakdowns represent a key trigger for several participants and inspiration for others to reappraise their lives. For others, relationships play a role in facilitating participation in terms of personal circumstances that allow engagement. One participant is making adjustments within her marriage of 25 years now she has additional priorities around studying.

In terms of the role of others, participants report being influenced by a range of sources. Six describe members of their family having directly or indirectly encouraged their engagement. Two students report similarly having been influenced by non-family members. Three participants describe being encouraged by a professional while one student has been referred by a professional agency. One interviewee reports on being discouraged by family but that this is having the opposite effect, serving to spur her on. The lack of extensive external referral begs the question where is all the professional advice and guidance?

Having a family represents a further key influence linked directly to aspects of generativity outlined above. For some, having a family has created a circumstance making participation possible and/or desired through, for example, the availability of time with children growing up or role redundancy in terms of offspring developing independence and leaving home. A number of female participants spoke of the triggering effect of wanting to be role models for their children, demonstrating a positive work ethic – which can reportedly be an absent example locally – and a need to achieve. A number of participants were keen to communicate by example that settling for a job is not an option. For many, the reason for doing the course is integrally link with improving their circumstances and showing their children what can be accomplished.

Death featured extensively on 13 of the life path charts but is mentioned by only four during the interviews. Reportedly the deaths cited made students reappraise and consider the pride their late parents would have felt and this can be argued to be a new interpretation of generativity in an inverted sense. In the case of one student, fear of

death within her family network created an urgent sense of needing to be able to support herself. Furthermore, illness and health issues are directly affecting two students and four others are, or have been, affected by illness in those around them.

As outlined in section 6.1, when considering the range of influences impacting on learner engagement, the life path exercise represents a useful tool to supplement the interview. In terms of key events, for one participant, three elements converged in her life: leaving her husband, the threat of redundancy and receiving encouragement from a tutor. For another participant, an event at work triggered her decision to resign and apply for access in pursuit of a new career but she had reportedly felt unhappy for some time. For one participant, seeing flyers for an adult education course triggered her decision to return to education (but this also coincided with children growing up) and for another, attending an open day at a local university inspired her, but again this converged with taking a career break. Another student reflected that their life has simply unfolded and their current situation is not in response to any specific decisions taken, just serendipity and happenstance. A further participant, alongside a number of others, reflects that the circumstances in their life now are right for facilitating reengagement. For another, voluntary redundancy served as a trigger but this coincided with children's age and a relationship breakdown. As several of the adult education tutors surmise, a lot has to converge in order to prompt, facilitate and sustain participation and the life path exercise, in conjunction with the interview discussion, represents a useful vehicle to stimulate this extraction of meaning.

Considering the learner journey holistically to include current participation on the access course, students explained how they heard about the course, which offers relevance in terms of how their participation emerged and unfolded. The majority of participants researched the access course proactively. Three heard about the course via professional agencies and programmes. A number of students reported having considered applying for the course over a number of previous years. In terms of the experience of undertaking the course, this offers relevance as the learner trajectories remain ongoing journeys rather than static entities. The majority of students describe the course as being intense and that the support they receive from peers amongst the cohort is invaluable to their ongoing achievement and engagement. The series of quotes presented about the challenges students are facing is demonstrative of the

extent to which these students are committed to this new path of educational reengagement, highlighting a stark shift from the earlier disengagement articulated by many.

All 31 students express aspirations to attend university. A number have received acceptances for the following September and only one (F17) is undecided about the future. University applications are driven by personal circumstances and proximity to home is a crucial factor for many logistically. Most notably one student is acting as a carer for his father and therefore this is a key influence on his decision to apply to local higher education institutions. Numerous participants reiterate a sense of urgency now they are back studying that they do not want another gap in their learning for fear of wasting time and losing momentum. Furthermore undertaking the course has played a pivotal role in developing feelings of self-belief.

In terms of self-belief, Bandura (1997, p. 11) writes on the concept of perceived self-efficacy which is “concerned with judgements of personal capability” building on psychological theories of outcome expectancy and social cognitive theory. A substantial body of research confirms that personal efficacy beliefs play a significant role in individuals’ career choices and progression and, “social cognitive theory posits a reciprocal but asymmetric relationship between perceived efficacy and occupational interests, with efficacy playing the stronger determinant role” (Bandura, 1997, p. 424). Essentially individuals plagued with a sense of self-doubt are likely to avoid occupations that risk permeating their relevant senses of inadequacy. Dweck (2000) writes on students’ mastery-oriented reactions to failure whereby they use self-instruction to motivate themselves. In addition, a further concept known as incremental progress theory is associated with student belief that their intelligence can be cultivated through learning (Dweck, 2000). An access student’s predisposition to certain degrees of self-efficacy and malleable self-theory will reportedly impact upon their success both in higher education and in subsequent employment. Self-efficacy and self-theories in turn are impacted upon in part by socio-economic background. In light of this these concepts provide clarification of the imperative of enhanced levels of self-belief attained through the access course and their potential influence beyond this context in learners’ ongoing trajectories.

In terms of a perception of education more generally, students express views that education is key and that the environmental context in which learning takes place is central to facilitating learning. In the context of education in relation to these individual learner trajectories, undertaking access to higher education is right for these students now.

Holistic consideration of the above findings tells us that some events are involved in prompting reengagement such as divorce and redundancy but that these do not act in isolation to influence individuals. When considering events leading up to the moment of reengagement, there is merit in considering Hodgkinson and Sparkes's (1997, p. 39) categorisation of turning points as structural, forced or self-initiated. For all of the participants in this study, their decisions to engage with the access course appear self-initiated but nevertheless there are certain structural elements at play such as a limited availability of jobs within the region and certain forced elements such as redundancy. Furthermore Denzin's (1989) typology of four categories of epiphany warrants reflection. The categories of epiphany proposed by Denzin include: a major event, which impacts a person's entire life; a cumulative or representative event, associated with an eruption or response to something that may have been occurring for some period of time; the third type is classed as a minor epiphany, representing a significant moment in a life or relationship; and, the fourth form of epiphany relates to the association of meaning with reliving an experience. In the case of learner reengagement in this study, the emphasis seems less on individual epiphanies and more on a cumulative convergence of diverse catalysts and triggers.

In terms of the work undertaken by Walters (2000) examining mature students' experiences of higher education, all three of the components in her proposed framework (redundancy, recognition and regeneration) seem to resonate with the feelings and experiences of these learners. The latter two elements, in terms of recognition of the need to change and a degree of regeneration of self-concept and self-esteem, seem of particular relevance. Walters (2000) conceptualises the first component, redundancy, in a positive way, embracing the dynamic change that such a sense can bring about. Her work nevertheless acknowledges the negative events that can often precipitate such a type of role or meaning redundancy. Erring more on the side of Walter's positive conceptualisation, many of the learners in this study seem to

embrace the inverse of redundancy in terms of seeking a new frame of reference, a new meaning perspective and renewed self-concept and skills. Walters (2000, p. 273) argues that, “development in adulthood may be understood as a response to, and perception of, personal history” and furthermore that “redundancy is a natural consequence of this”. She argues this is an integral aspect of maturation and that a key task facing adults is responding to this challenge, an interpretation commensurate with some of the views of Hendry and Kloep (2002)

Hendry and Kloep (2002) focus at length on the task facing adults as they seek to develop and grow. In relation to the sample triggers for developmental change conceptualised by Kloep *et al.* (2009) (appendix B), some of these triggers including community needs, now or never decisions and dependent family members are also of relevance in the lives of these learners but there is more impacting than individual events in isolation, more akin to Hendry and Kloep’s (2002) conceptualisation incorporating biological dispositions, social resources, skills in various domains, self-efficacy and structural resources.

It can be concluded that there are a range of complex emotions and influences at play for these access students and these include for example: a desire to overcome regret, a sense of generativity and a desire to act as a role model. All of this is anchored in the wider state of the local area, which is fuelled by a shortage of available employment and an incitement of emotions such as a desire to break the mould and a desire not to “do nothing like the rest of ‘em”. Examination of the life paths and interview narratives reveals that the catalysts and triggers for these learners therefore represent a complex interplay of personal, contextual and environmental circumstances and emotions that converge at the point of reengagement and extend beyond it to their ongoing trajectories. The influences on these individuals’ participation is much more nuanced than the deterministic trajectory work undertaken by Rees *et al.* (2000) would lead us to believe. Educational reengagement is a sensitive process and while there are some similarities in learner journeys such as negative school experience, undertaking dead end jobs, having a family and the articulation of particular eureka moments, for all of these participants the decision to engage is highly personal, shaped by a lifetime of circumstantial catalysts and a range of triggering events

converging to facilitate participation at this particular juncture in their own individual lives.

Chapter 7. Conclusion

7.1 Chapter overview

This chapter begins by reflecting on the aims and objectives of the thesis alongside the imperative for researching contextual catalysts and triggers of adult returners in South Wales in order to reiterate the scope and relevance of the work. Section 7. 3 provides an overview of the research undertaken with a particular emphasis on the underpinning theory, associated method and key findings. Section 7. 4 clarifies the originality of this thesis and outlines the contribution to knowledge. Potential implications for policy and access provision are then outlined. Sections 7.6 and 7.7 discuss respectively the limitations of this research study and areas for further research.

7.2 Recap of the aims and objectives and clarification of the imperative for researching catalysts and triggers

This research has developed an understanding of the catalysts and triggers that influence engagement in lifelong learning in the context of adult learners undertaking access courses in the South Wales Valleys. The focus on access students was chosen due to the specifically unique nature of such programmes as potential stepping-stones in a learner's reengagement journey. Catalysts and triggers as they are conceptualised in this study pertain to environmental influences, personal circumstances, influencing events and emotions as they were experienced by access course learners. Together they constitute two interrelated concepts that, when analysed, offered insight into learner participation and engagement. This has been achieved through the investigation of three research questions:

- 1) What personal and environmental circumstances act as a catalyst to influence adult learners' engagement in undertaking access courses in the South Wales Valleys?
- 2) What events and influences during the life experience of a learner trigger their decisions to undertake formal adult education in the context of access students in the South Wales Valleys?

3) What interplay of catalysts and triggers in the experience of these learners act to prompt their reengagement?

As outlined throughout the thesis, detailed elements of adult education participation are under-researched and this investigation has therefore focused on a neglected and important aspect of lifelong learning. It is argued that engaging in education holds much potential to emancipate the individual at both a personal level and more widely in terms of benefiting family and, at times, the wider community. This lack of understanding represents a gap that needs to be addressed and this study has sought to examine the reengagement experience of a group of access to higher education students in depth by examining a wide range of existing literature and by exploring the catalysts and triggers in their learning journeys, past and present, and their personal trajectories.

7.3 Key findings and theoretical links

Chapter 2 explored the industrial development of the South Wales Valleys and the economic and skills challenges facing the region alongside an examination of historical development of adult education within the locale and more widely. A discussion about the concept of lifelong learning, beyond a purely functional capacity, was also introduced alongside reflections on the potential barriers to participation at both a personal dispositional level and more structurally. The focus of this chapter was on providing a backdrop to adult education and specifically the role of the access course in the context of South Wales, to outline the context in which potential circumstantial catalysts developed that influenced the learners within this study. While highlighting the crucial role that access courses can play in offering a second chance to learners, an alarming trend in the reduction of course numbers was identified.

Chapter 3 focused on individual aspects of participation to include a review of literature on motivation and studies on adult education participation motives, lifespan development theory and learning careers. Authors such as Evans *et al.* (2013), Boeren *et al.* (2010), Swain and Hammond (2011), Hockey and James (2003) and Alheit (1994) emphasise the influence of both agency and structural forces on learner

participation. Hodkinson and colleagues contribute the highly topical notion of the learning career and Crossan *et al.* (2003) extend this work to encapsulate the perspectives of adult learners, insightfully drawing conclusions on the fragility and volatility of adult learning identities. Hodkinson (2008) makes reference to turning points, and subsequently categorises them, Denzin (1989) articulates the concept of epiphanies alongside a classification of his conceptualisation and Antikainen *et al.* (1996) outline life-changing events. All are concepts of key interest in relation to the idea of catalysts and triggers, raising the potential for eureka-like moments amongst this sample learner population. Although much of the work undertaken by Rees *et al.* (2000) focuses on predictive trajectories, their findings, situated within industrial South Wales, nevertheless acknowledge the more nuanced elements of participation and invite the undertaking of a study such as this. In addition, the frameworks proposed by Walters (2000), Blair *et al.* (1995) and Swain and Hammond (2011) all served as informative springboards for the articulation of catalysts and triggers in this context and influenced the diagrammatic depiction of catalysts and triggers in figure 3, representing the preliminary conceptual framework in the contexts of learners' own personal trajectories. The literature review in this chapter highlights that adult education is neglected in terms of both research and policy in relation to youth participation and reiterates the power of access courses for learners and yet how much more we still need to understand their engagement.

In order to facilitate an investigation of these issues, the terms catalysts and triggers and their presence and the role they play in learner reengagement in formal learning, this study adopted an interpretivist perspective. A key feature that delineates this paradigm is associated with the difference between natural sciences and the social world and specifically, the varying logic required to understand human behaviour (Heracleous, 2006; Bryman, 2008). In order to elicit the meaning learners apply in their reengagement journeys and to capture the rich experiences of participants, the study was grounded in a life history approach, drawing on aspects of interpretive interactionism and interpretive biography (Denzin, 2006). Rich data was captured from adult education tutors via semi-structured interviews and from students through group interviews in conjunction with critical life path charts. A grounded approach to the analysis, consistent with the methodological stance (Musson, 2006), was adopted to facilitate the coding of data and the emergence of themes.

The local adult education tutors represent 16 expert witnesses who offered insight from their perspectives on participation motives and wider circumstantial elements from which a number of key themes were identified, many of which resonated with the subsequent student data. The tutors identified issues with basic skills shortages locally and reflected on the impact of the limited availability of employment within the region, reinforcing the findings in chapter 2. Institutional issues such as a reduction in part-time access provision and the resulting requirement for students to undertake full-time study were raised, alongside additional obstacles in terms of the grading introduction to access attainment and the setting of score-based admissions targets by higher education institutions. The impact of funding constraints upon course provision was also highlighted.

In terms of findings more aligned with aspects of individual participation, tutors articulated aspects of the concept of generativity as a perceived motivator for students. In addition, tutors cited that the barriers (as they are reported in the literature) remain ever-present and they highlighted that support around the learner is crucial to both promote engagement and foster ongoing participation. In terms of recruiting students, development workers were identified as playing a pivotal role and the power of word-of-mouth recruitment was suggested to be extensive in conjunction with the support learners offer one another when undertaking a programme of study. Furthermore, carefully designed pedagogy was seen to be key to facilitate ongoing learner engagement.

In the context of catalysts and triggers more specifically, results from tutor interviews proposed negative school experiences, the local environment and particular events such as a spouse's redundancy as key influences on learner participation. Learners within this region were argued to have clear employability drivers and vocational aspirations, often underpinned by a desire to improve family circumstances. The tutors acknowledged that all learner journeys are highly unique and personal but they surmised that engagement emerges when circumstances and timing are right for the individual. Additional potential influences on learners cited by tutors include a desire to be a role model (building on the notion of generativity), personal relationships, ageing parents and a sense of being unfulfilled. In their view, emotions (such as the

nerve to overcome fear of participation) have to converge with circumstances (such as children entering compulsory schooling). Participation was suggested to yield increases in self-belief and often, disbelief expressed by the adult learner about their previously unknown personal capabilities.

The grounded themes developed from tutors' perspectives were then triangulated with the experiences recounted directly by the learners themselves. Key findings that emerged from the 31 access students' group interviews and critical life path charts included evidence of the impact of the historical development of the region and resulting unemployment and wider economic circumstances that played a significant influence in driving vocational motivations and aspirations of access students, echoing the findings in both chapters 2 and 5. Furthermore, whether positive or negative, experience of compulsory and institutionalised learning was suggested to be highly influential as a formative element of personal learner trajectories. The findings of McGivney (2001) and others - who emphasise the power of negative schooling - were played out amongst these participants but nevertheless these individuals have chosen to reengage with educational opportunities once again despite their earlier experiences.

Students articulated a range of emotions including former and present ambition (latent ambition as articulated by tutors and disbelief about it), the powerful bifurcation point where participation became a feasible reality and regret on a number of levels. A strong sense of urgency presently felt by access participants was articulated thematically as 'now or never'. Additionally the embodied concept of generativity emerged to serve as a powerful motivator for many. The majority of students possessed vocational aspirations and were reportedly striving to have a career as opposed to a job. A strong sense of pride and achievement was articulated both individually and collectively across the cohorts.

An early influence reported to have previously swayed participants away from education was the power of having money: a view that has evolved with age and increasing personal and familial responsibilities. In terms of present reengagement, relationship breakdowns represented key triggering events. Participants reported being influenced to participate by family and friends but very few cited examples of

professional agency intervention. Government funded schemes played a role in advising two female participants to consider a return to education and only very few students had received professional careers advice as a result of having sought it proactively. Having a family represented a powerful influence with many wishing to act as role models for their children, linked to generativity and furthermore, the impact of death and illness seem to foster an almost inverted sense of generativity.

As the adult education tutors surmised, a lot has to converge – often multiple events and circumstances or serendipitous aspects – in order to prompt and facilitate reengagement. In terms of the practical elements of re-engagement, the majority of participants researched the course proactively and in the context of their ongoing learner trajectories, reported being extensively supported to stay engaged by their peers. All of the students excepting only one conveyed a strong sense of wishing to extend their learner trajectories to include direct progression to higher education so they could gain qualifications to secure future employment. The majority articulated a transformation in their sense of self-belief.

In terms of catalysts and triggers more specifically, participation was seemingly a result of converging circumstances and influences and these were highly individual and nuanced. Educational reengagement is a sensitive process and while there were some similarities in the learner journeys, the decision to engage for all these sample learners was highly personal, shaped by a lifetime of circumstantial catalysts and a range of triggering events converging to facilitate participation at this particular juncture. This echoes the work of Hodkinson (2008), Reay *et al.* (2001) and Ball *et al.* (2000) who argue that in the context of career decisions, these are rarely single events and this work in turn reinforces and embodies the definition of a learning career (Bloomer and Hodkinson, 2000).

In terms of the research questions, the following conclusions can be drawn:

In response to the first research question regarding what personal and environmental circumstances act as a catalyst to influence engagement amongst adult learners undertaking access courses in the South Wales Valleys, as demonstrated in chapters 5 and 6 and summarised above, the key catalysts emerging in this study include the

powerful influence of school experience (both positive and negative), latent ambition, holding a job as opposed to pursuing a career, the power of having money post-school until this is overshadowed by the unfulfilling nature of employment and the state of the local employment market and associated socio-economic conditions.

In relation to the second research question, about the triggering of access students' decisions to undertake formal adult education in the South Wales Valleys, a number of emotions, motivations, influences and events are cited. They include the concept of generativity, having a family, a desire to be a role model, a form of inverted generativity associated with death and illness, employability and vocational drivers, other people and relationships, especially relationship breakdowns. It can be argued that the presence of vocational motivations during a time of economic recession is unsurprising.

In response to the third research question regarding the interplay of catalysts and triggers in the experience of learners that act to prompt reengagement, it is clear that this is the result of a complex interaction. The tutors surmise that the timing must be right for the particular individual and that their emotions and circumstances must converge. The students, through their group interview contributions and individual life paths, demonstrate that multiple events and circumstances converge and this is at times supplemented by elements of serendipity. Even when participants cite having experienced a 'eureka' moment (as in the case of participants F2 and F16), similar to the potential expectations of Denzin (1989) and Antikainen (1998) with epiphanies and life-changing events, these never occur in isolation and participants all cite multiple forces at play rendering reengagement viable and appropriate at that particular point in time alongside multiple convergence points. This unique interplay of catalysts and triggers may differ between individual learner trajectories and therefore this represents a topical area for further research. This observation highlights that research methodology must be sensitive to this interplay. While the critical incident technique holds much appeal, it can be difficult to identify individual crises or moments. As a consequence there is benefit in using multiple methods such as group interviews combined with a critical life path exercise to extract the individually contextualised nuances.

7.4 Contributions to knowledge

The contribution of this work lies partly in the interdisciplinary nature of the literature examined. By bringing together historical, sociological, and lifespan development theories alongside other facets of adult participation literature, this thesis establishes a foundation from which the concept of catalysts and triggers has been contextually investigated. This thesis demonstrates originality of method through the marriage of the group interview, strongly advocated for use within lifelong learning research (Field, 2000), in conjunction with the modified critical incident technique in the form of the critical life path exercise. Deployment of this method has facilitated the elicitation of rich data from participants while providing a unique approach to capturing life histories incorporating participants' explanations of key influencing forces and events from their perspectives.

The key contribution to knowledge pertains to the development of the conceptual framework outlining the catalysts and triggers that learners associated with their reengagement in the context of this study and the multiple convergence points punctuating their journeys. This is depicted diagrammatically below as figure 5. As identified through chapters 5 and 6, potential engagement triggers as they pertain to learners in this study include generativity, the desire to be a role model, having a family, employability drivers and vocational aspirations, the influence of others and relationships, death and illness. These are depicted in figure 5 above the central, horizontal bi-directional arrow. Catalysts as they are conceptualised in this study include the impact of compulsory schooling, latent ambition, "dead-end" jobs, the power of having money overshadowing unfulfilling nature of work, the state of the local area and the economy more widely. These are depicted below the central, horizontal bi-directional arrow. The central bi-directional arrow itself is representative of the convergence points as experienced by the learners around their access course engagement and their ongoing educational reengagement. Participation as experienced by the learners in this study has yielded a series of emotions including a sense of 'now or never', pride and ambition. Their reengagement is also shaping and shaped by their membership of the learning community that they have joined. This is influenced by pedagogy and support received from within their access cohort. The

vertical bi-directional arrows are intended to symbolise the ongoing interaction between the learner and the diverse influences around them. While many of the components within this framework are highly contextual to the experiences of individuals within this work, they also have the potential for wider applicability.

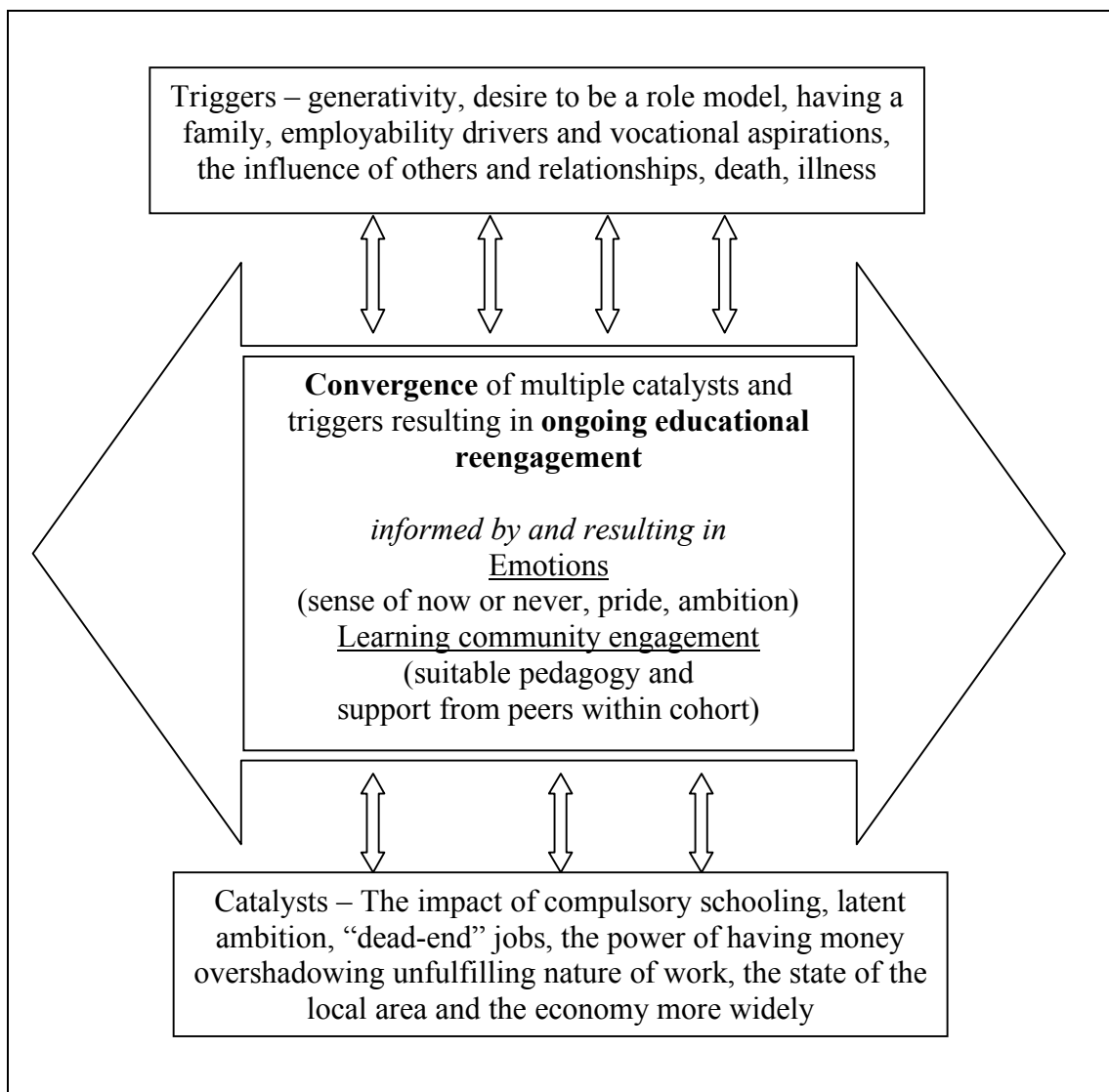


Figure 5. Catalysts and Triggers from the perspectives of learners

The development of this framework constitutes an original contribution to knowledge as it has been constructed interpretively from the lived experience of learners, it offers greater contextual insight than existing models of participation and it focuses specifically on access learners and the context of the South Wales Valleys.

7.5 Implications for access policy and practice

This thesis raises a number of implications and highlights a multitude of significant issues in relation to access policy and provision. Many of the challenges facing the South Wales Valleys outlined in chapter 2 remain today. Issues such as significant basic skills deficits, low levels of educational attainment and high levels of unemployment persist. Translated into an educational context, some of these challenges need to be considered pedagogically by tutors and can represent obstacles students must work hard to overcome. As outlined, access to higher education remains a key public policy issue and strategies to widen participation permeate education agendas. Access to higher education courses represent a key vehicle to allow mature learners to return to education and an attractive route for adult learners due to the condensed one year duration of the programme (supported by evidence in the ‘now or never’ finding in this study) and an appealing alternative to A-level qualifications, especially in light of the powerful bonds that can form across a cohort. The notion of an access course acting as a stepping-stone represents a key facet of their appeal and success as a programme. An alarming trend is reported however in the Access to Higher Education Report (QAA, 2013) suggesting a recent decline in access provision within the UK. Clearly in the context of these 31 learners, the access course they are undertaking is providing a valuable lifeline for them back into education. A continued demise of access provision would potentially close more doors for learners such as these in the future, running counter to important social justice and social mobility agendas in policy.

The impact of a reduction in part-time access to higher education provision also warrants attention. Given the flexibility so often required by mature students in view of their competing life pressures, the closure of part-time routes seems to run counter to the intention behind widening participation initiatives. While it is understandable that institutions must monitor retention rates when part-time access students reportedly struggle to complete programmes of study, there are additional dimensions at play within the social justice and equality of access remit to take into account. The Welsh policy document *For Our future: The 21st Century Higher Education Strategy and Plan for Wales* published in 2009 makes an explicit pledge to increase part-time

provision but this does not appear to be filtering through in the context of access to higher education course provision. Once again, given the power of access explained in this study, a reduction of provision in this manner must be avoided. While the learners in this research were all full-time students and expressed a preference for completing their programme of study in a one-year period, their commitment and dedication permeated their narratives, highlighting the crucial impact access to higher education courses can have on individuals' lives, no matter what mode of study they pursue.

This study outlined the perspectives of tutors and students in relation to a range of elements with the power to influence reengagement and ongoing participation. These include the key role development workers can play in inviting learners to take their first steps back into education; assessment on application/entry to a programme; the importance of applying suitable pedagogy to maximise support for the student experience; and, the introduction of grading to access qualifications and the resultant tariff setting (and raising) by higher education institutions. It is important that all of these dimensions are considered at an educational institution level to ensure maximum reengagement of potential access students as well as wider equality of access issues in order to avoid discord with widening participation goals and to promote contextualised local responsive provision, so important for securing the ongoing commitment and engagement of learners. In light of the crucial role development workers can play in encouraging a return to learning, as emphasised by the tutors who contributed to this study, it is important that funding for such roles is maintained. Funding constraints can also limit course offering and structure including the size of a cohort and the impact of this on student participation must not be underestimated in view of learner vulnerability and fragile learner identities identified in this thesis.

The application of appropriate pedagogy seemingly has a direct impact on student engagement and retention in this context and it must therefore remain a key priority for access course developers and deliverers. The learners in this study as well as the tutor participants reported overwhelmingly on the power of support yielded across a cohort towards fellow students and the pivotal role this plays in securing ongoing student retention. In light of this it would seem that current trends towards distance

learning courses and virtual online learning communities would potentially not offer the same level of camaraderie and support so imperative for this student demographic to foster their ongoing engagement. As a consequence, a case could be made that access courses, regularly attracting students with potentially fragile and vulnerable learning identities, are not as well suited to online delivery platforms as other types of courses. Distance and online learning may appear to offer a solution for institutions seeking to support access while reducing embedded provision and associated costs. This thesis illustrates that such approaches may have the opposite effect on access learners as the environmental context in which learning takes place is central to facilitating learning and the sensitive process of educational reengagement.

Despite the rhetoric of lifelong being cradle to grave (Schuller and Watson, 2009), there is strong evidence at a policy level that funding and attention remains focused on younger learners. Within Wales the policy document entitled *The Learning Country* - outlining the national comprehensive and lifelong learning education programme up until 2010 - contained a chapter called *Comprehensive and Lifelong Learning in Wales* which makes no detailed reference to learners over the age of 19. Furthermore, when discussing support to be offered by Careers Wales, there is a clear statement that the majority of resource is to be targeted at young people. More recent work such as the *Future Ambitions* report (Welsh Government, 2010) invites a wider focus on careers in the context of workplace and community learning settings. This report makes explicit reference to Schuller and Watson's (2009) *Inquiry*, embracing the application of support beyond solely younger age groups. This work also highlights that careers advice and guidance has the potential to be life changing for recipients of it but that there is presently a risk that people are being missed, making a compelling case that further work needs to be done. Although an optimistic report for the future, past poor practice and paucity of investment may go some way to explaining why such a small proportion of the adult learners in this study received careers and guidance advice from professionals prior to pursuing the access course.

Much employability policy focuses on 19 year-olds and does not consider the employability of mature learners and non-traditional students. The access students featured in this study are acutely aware of their own employability and desire to improve it. When access learners possess such a strong employability focus as

demonstrated in this study, there exists a need to acknowledge this across age groups and embrace it from a policy perspective, when employability and skills development are such key facets of educational agendas. In addition there exists a pressing need to look realistically at the job prospects available within the area and the feasibility of student mobility in light of logistical and practical issues.

In view of the significant challenges facing the region, many carried over from the start of the previous century, and the long history of adult education within the area, one might ask where the passionate and radical educational ethic has gone? While there are positive current initiatives aiming to take provision into communities, there does not seem to be any collective mobilisation of citizens. The learners in this study do however report an acute awareness of the socio-economic status of the region. The sense of generativity articulated by participants, their desire to improve circumstances locally and their observation of the poor work ethic they have witnessed locally, all speak of something of a collective conscience. Many of the participants in this study were left profoundly adversely affected by their compulsory educational experience. While there are current initiatives within schools seeking to raise aspirations and encourage higher education participation, once again prioritising youth participation, such intervention is too late for learners like these who have already left formal schooling environments. This suggests that greater investment is required beyond just compulsory schooling that could create wide-reaching tangible social impact across families and communities, an important policy implication but a challenging one to see realised given current reductions in funding for adult education.

The access students featured in this study have risen above the odds, defying the determinants purported by Rees *et al.* (2000), and returned to education. The majority of them have found the experience transformational. It is imperative that access courses such as the ones these students have studied persist to allow opportunities for future students seeking a second chance. While taken individually many of the findings in this study may not be surprising such as the sense of regret felt by students, nevertheless their documentation and the articulation of learner voices highlight the power of access courses and the life-changing impact such programmes can have rather than simply offering a focus on policy expectations and institutional strategy. The overall contribution of the final conceptual framework to policy is in

identifying catalysts and triggers to further see how the contextual nature of these journeys, learner motivations and student experiences connect together to create unique learning situations which have wide ranging implications for learners and their communities. It is important to draw attention to these findings in light of funding cuts and a reduction in course numbers and to give learners such as these a voice and highlight the role access to higher education can play which may warrant further consideration by policymakers. This framework therefore may be of use in analysing the specific situations facing access learners in different contexts and understanding learner needs.

7.6 Limitations

While this study has carefully respected ethical considerations and procedures, the interview and group interview methods always carry the possibility of distrust when the researcher is a stranger, thereby leading to potential reluctance to disclose sensitive details. The utmost was done by the researcher to put participants at ease both in terms of the nature of the interview conversation and in relation to the processes in place to ensure confidentiality. The highly personal disclosure in writing by two participants is testament to the trust placed in the researcher in the context of this study and the authenticity of the data collected.

The chosen methodology does not demand a large sample size due to the highly individual nature of the interpretive interactionist approach, nevertheless a potential limitation is associated with the scale of the study. Due to the small sample size it has not been possible to confidently claim any findings for gender or age differences. This would only be possible through a larger scale study. Although the chosen sample is appropriately bounded by the depth of the method and the search for detail and authenticity in the participant responses, exploration of more student trajectories could have widened the findings although there was evidence of saturation in the learner population selected. There is scope to extend the work further by investigating a larger selection of access courses or engaging wider forms of data collection to include for example participant observation or more creative methods alluded to such as video diaries or even photo elicitation research.

An additional potential limitation is associated with having taken a current ‘snapshot’ of learner experience and invited retrospective reflection without undertaking follow-up to examine students’ ongoing progression. While this does not detract from the depth of the current findings, this extended approach nevertheless represents a potential avenue for further research as outlined below.

The empirical data elicited in this work is heavily reliant on individuals’ personal history recall. Study participants agreed to participate willingly, shared their views and experiences frankly, contributed very actively, demonstrated elements of scaffolding within the group interview context and the life path data permitted an element of triangulation which depicted a consistency in personal responses. The inclusion of tutor interviews also serves as another frame of reference for the data. Additionally, the highly personal levels of disclosure both during the interviews and particularly in the case of several of the written life paths demonstrate a high degree of openness. Despite this there is no way to guarantee that a full picture has been represented which is a further potential limitation within the research that it is impossible to regulate for which care has been taken to minimise.

7.7 Recommendations for further research

While the current study invites participants to reflect retrospectively on their learner journeys and to report on their current experiences and future ambitions, it does not undertake follow up with them once they have completed the access programme and progressed to higher education. Further research could involve longitudinal analysis, and an additional stage could be added to such research to meet students perhaps 12 months hence to investigate their ongoing personal trajectories. Work undertaken by Findsen *et al.* (2011) employs such a longitudinal approach and this dimension holds much appeal for furthering investigation into the ongoing impact of catalysts and triggers.

While this work eschews the more deterministic approach to predictive trajectories, it embraces the concept of trajectory conceptualised in terms of an individual learner’s own history and experiences. Across the 31 unique trajectories there is evidence of some commonality such as negative school experiences, engaging in so-called dead

end work and being motivated by a sense of generativity. As a consequence there may be scope to extend this work by seeking to identify whether catalysts and triggers differ (or are replicated) for learners according to their intentions and experiences by further investigating the interpretive schemes of participants and comparing and contrasting their interview narratives and critical life paths.

Given the potential emancipatory power of educational engagement and the relevance of catalysts and triggers, it would be interesting to examine this work in wider contexts beyond South Wales with different or potentially somewhat larger cohorts. While the goal of such an extension would not be replication *per se*, it would however seek to develop these findings more widely to yield, for example, different environmental catalysts. Such work could focus on non-access students or be undertaken in other regions of the UK experiencing similar post-industrialisation challenges such as high unemployment and limited availability of work.

Future studies may wish to take more widely into account the impact of new funding regimes and the recent increase in tuition fees. Selwyn and Gorard (2002) cite McGivney (1993) and Maguire *et al.* (1993) in highlighting that cost is the most frequently asserted obstacle to participation be it direct or indirect expense. Fees were scarcely mentioned by participants during this research but the empirical data was collected prior to the introduction of increased tuition fees. Consequently future cohorts may adopt a different view and demonstrate a greater level of influence from financial burden and this could play a key role in shaping relevant catalysts and triggers.

Reflecting on the work of Burr (2003) and Gergen (3009), it is interesting to consider the contribution of symbolic interactionism to the concept of the negotiated social role. This can influence the playing out of scripts as for example the role of teacher, wife or mother and Goffman (1959) writes specifically on the notion of dramaturgy which involves presenting a public self which inherently means hiding or masking certain parts of ourselves or our lives from others. An investigation of dramaturgy in adult education holds much appeal and while detailed conclusions about this are beyond the realms of this current thesis and the analysis undertaken, it nevertheless

highlights a fascinating and powerful area for further research drawing in detail on the ideas of Goffman.

In view of the benefits that can derive from participation in lifelong learning and the complexity identified through this study surrounding the unique convergence points of catalysts and triggers on individual learner trajectories, more work needs to be undertaken in this domain to further extend the understanding of these concepts and the resultant influence of them in the context of South Wales, access learners and more widely.

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Appendix A. Colour-coding of participation reasons/motives to achieve synthesised classifications in Table 2

Symbol-coding	Participation motives and reasons	Authors
@	Career progression and development, including towards career change and education progression	Houle (1961), Johnstone and Rivera (1965), Burgess (1974), Scala (1996), Sargant <i>et al.</i> (1997), Jackson and Jamieson (2009), Swain and Hammond (2011), Boshier (1971)
%	Personal interest and development	Houle (1961), Johnstone and Rivera (1965), Burgess (1974), Scala (1996), Sargant <i>et al.</i> (1997), Silverstein <i>et al.</i> (2001), Jackson and Jamieson (2009), Swain and Hammond (2011), Boshier 1971)
+	Intellectual stimulation and ‘escape’	Johnstone and Rivera (1965), Burgess (1974), Scala (1996), Silverstein <i>et al.</i> (2001), Swain and Hammond (2011), Boshier (1971)
&	Social and religious development for the individual	Houle (1961), Johnstone and Rivera (1965), Burgess (1974), Scala (1996), Jackson and Jamieson (2009), Swain and Hammond (2011), Boshier (1971)
*	External pressures (not career related)	Boshier (1971)

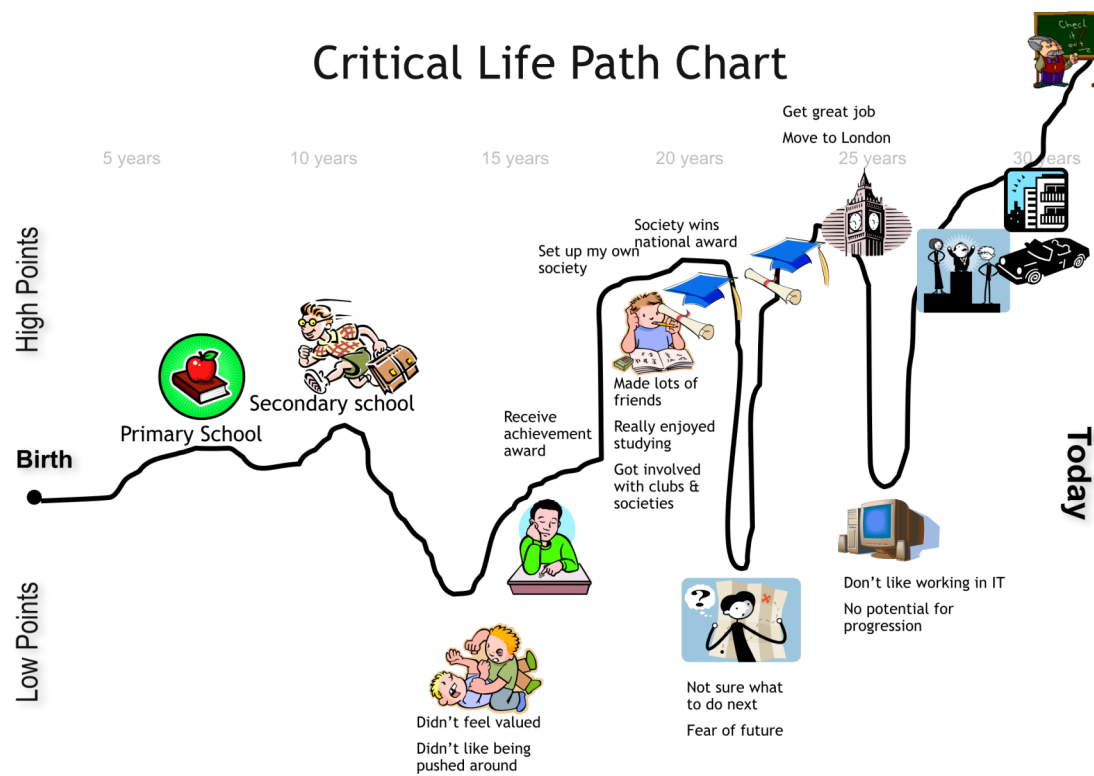
Boshier (1971) - Social relationships (& - External expectations (* - Social welfare (& - Professional development/advancement (@) - Escape/stimulation (+) - Cognitive interest (%)	Burgess (1974) A desire: - To know (%) - To reach a personal (%), social or religious goal (& - To take part in a social activity (& - To escape (+) - To comply with formal	Silverstein <i>et al.</i> (2001) - Seeking intellectual stimulation (+) - Learning for the sake of learning (%) - Desire simply for additional education (%)	Houle (1961) – Three learning orientations: - Goal-oriented learners: Seek to achieve a specific purpose through pursuit of education (@) - Activity-oriented learners: engage in education for non-	Jackson and Jamieson (2009) - Interest in the subject (%) - To develop as a person (%) - To get a recognised qualification (@) - To change type of work
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	requirements (@)		education related purposes such as social interaction (&) - Learning-oriented learners: Seek to gain new knowledge (%)	(@) - As a stepping stone to future learning (@) - To meet people (&)
Johnstone and Rivera (1965) - To prepare for a new job (@) - To help with present job (@) - To become better informed (%) - Spare time enjoyment (%) - To help with home centred tasks (%) - To help with other everyday tasks (%) - To meet new people (&) - To escape daily routine (+)	Sargant <i>et al.</i> (1997) Three broad categories for motivation: - Work (@) - Personal development (%) - Progression	Scala (1996) - Enrichment/love of learning (%) - Fill void after life changes (&) - Interest in course/subject (%) - Job training/to get a degree (@) - Always wanted to go to college (%) - To explore new options (%) - Mental stimulation/activity (+)	Swain and Hammond (2011) - To gain a recognised qualification (@) - Increase future employment options and opportunities (@) - New job/career change (@) - Improvement of current job (@) - To enable further study (@) - To gain specific skills (either for work or study) (@) - To gain opportunities to live abroad (@) - To pursue interest in the subject (%) - To do something different (+) - Proving to self – and/or to others (&) - Enjoyment (%) - To be in a stimulating environment (+) - Wanting to study and do something intellectual (+)	

Appendix B. Examples of triggers for developmental change taken from Kloep *et al.* (2009)

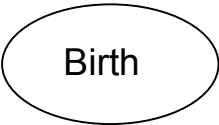
<u>Education</u>	<u>Health</u>	<u>Relationships</u>
Dyslexia Learning difficulties (Re) training Educational offers, courses Alienation from learning institutions Alternative learning organisations Books Internet Learning from others Informal opportunities	Disability Accident Serious illness Mental illness Addiction Ageing Sexual problems Menopause Body changes, losing looks	Grand-parents, spouses, other family members Teachers, coaches, bosses Social workers, members of charity groups Role models, celebrities, 'heroes' Peers, friends: support, advice, challenge Scholarship Work/professional groups
<u>Economy</u>	<u>Leisure</u>	<u>Work</u>
Poverty Wealth Mortgage, re-possession Credit card debt Dependent family members Pension	Sports Hobbies Being good at something/talent Travel 'Now or never' decisions Boredom Participating & coaching	Unemployment Promotion & demotion Self-employment Retirement Voluntary work Community involvement Stress Reorganisation Re-training & job change
<u>Locality</u>	<u>Values</u>	<u>Others' needs</u>
Move locally/abroad Downsize property Intergenerational space conflicts Physical surrounding Nursing home No facilities	Ethnicity Religion Political Minority rights Mid-life crisis Encountering ageism Gender issues	Children special needs Education Caring for someone Friends need of support Charity groups, fighting injustice Community needs

Appendix C. Sample critical life path document



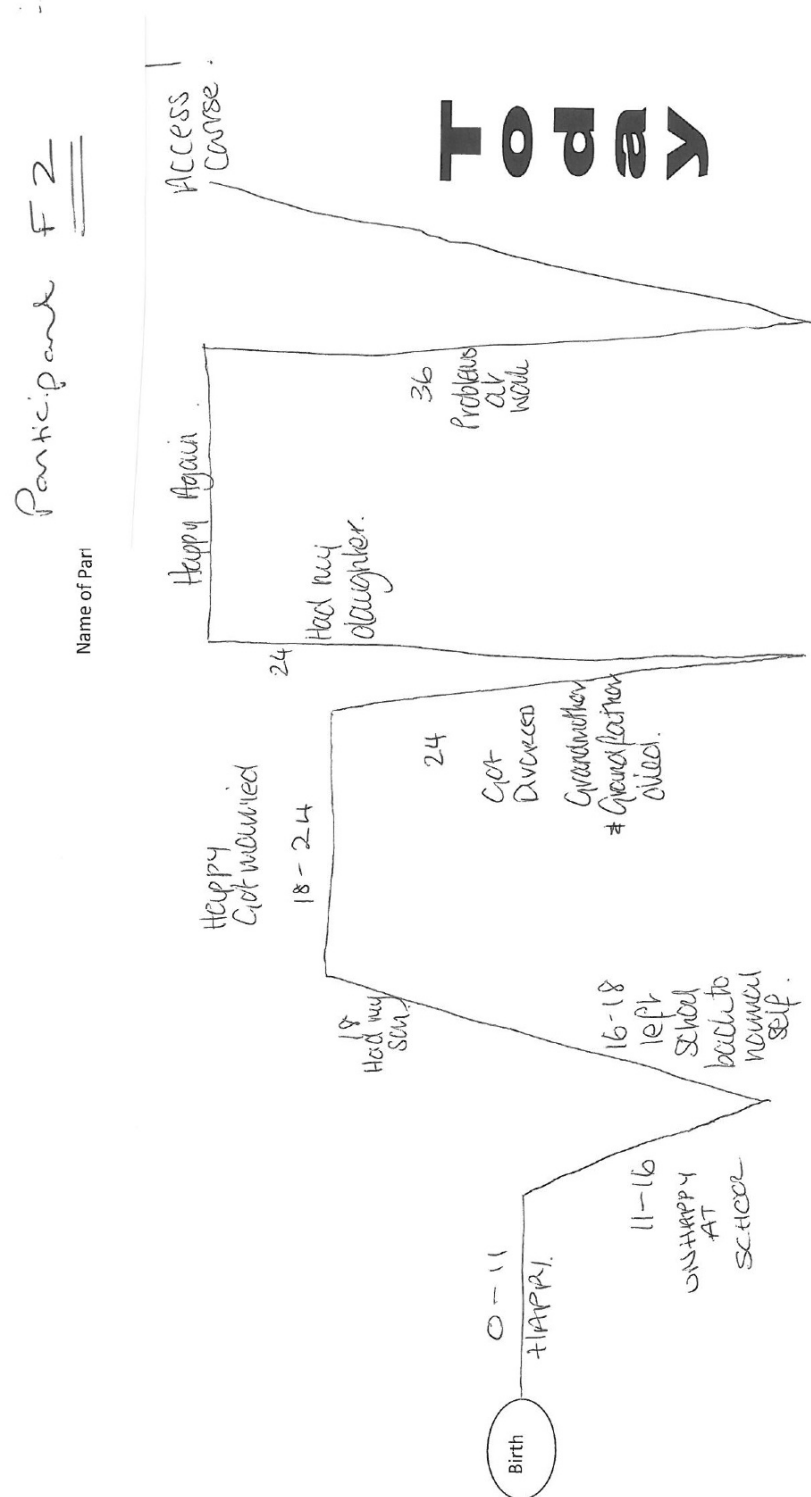
Appendix D. Blank critical life path

Name of participant: _____



Today

Appendix E. Example life path chart from this study



Appendix F. Tutor participant information sheet



Engagement in Adult Education

Participant Information Sheet

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide whether or not to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully.

What is the purpose of the study?

The aim of this study is to explore engagement in adult education. A key part of the study will involve exploring the views of adult education supporters and providers on adult learner engagement and the views of adult learners themselves on their personal learning journeys. This is a three-year study of which these discussions form the second stage.

Why have I been invited to participate?

The research seeks to explore the perceptions of supporters of adult education and adult education providers in the South Wales area on this topic. The second phase will explore the views of adult learners on their reasons for engaging with formal learning opportunities.

Do I have to take part?

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a consent form. If you decide to take part you are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason.

What will happen to me if I take part?

If you do decide to participate, you will be invited to have a conversation with Sarah Graves about adult education and your perceptions on the reasons individuals participate in formal learning opportunities. The discussion is likely to take around 30 minutes, subject to your availability, and will be audio recorded if you agree to this.

Will what I say in this study be kept confidential?

All information collected about individuals will be kept strictly confidential (subject to legal limitations). The real names of participants will be known only to the researcher, Sarah Graves, and her supervisory team at the University of Glamorgan. Professor Danny Saunders, Head of the Centre for Lifelong Learning, and Dr Robert Payne, Head of Outreach, are supervising the study. The names of all participants

will be anonymised in the thesis and related publications. All data associated with the research will be stored securely.

What will happen to the results of the research study?

The results of the research will be used in my doctoral thesis that is registered at the University of Glamorgan. Parts of the thesis may contribute to research publications and I would be happy to provide copies of any published research.

Who has reviewed the study?

This study has been agreed with the appropriate Ethics Officer at the University of Glamorgan.

Contact for further information

Sarah Graves
Research Student
Centre for Lifelong Learning
University of Glamorgan
7 Forest Grove (FG712), Treforest, CF37 1DL
Tel: 01443 654357 Fax: 01443 482931
E-mail: scgraves@glam.ac.uk
www.glam.ac.uk/cell

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet

Appendix G. Consent form

CONSENT FORM

Participation in Adult Education

Sarah Graves
Research Student
Centre for Lifelong Learning
University of Glamorgan
7 Forest Grove
Pontypridd
CF37 1DL



Please initial box

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the participant information sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving reason.
3. I agree to take part in the above study.

☐☐☐

Please tick box

Yes

No

4. I agree to the interview being audio recorded
5. I agree to the potential use of anonymised quotes in the researcher's doctoral thesis and associated publications.

☐☐☐☐

Name of Participant

Date

Signature

Name of Researcher

Date

Signature

Appendix H. Tutor interview schedule

- Who, broadly speaking, are the adults that enrol on the courses that you support/deliver?**
- Why do you feel these adults are taking courses?**
- What do you think they hope to achieve personally/professionally?**
- What, from your perspective, do they specifically hope to get out of the course(s) they have enrolled on?**
- What, in your view, do they intend to do on completion of the course?**
- What type of educational history do these learners possess?**
- In seeking to explore catalysts and triggers (and potentially in the context of those with a gap in their learning), do you perceive there are particular events that trigger engagement with learning opportunities?**

Appendix I. Overview of tutor codes

Tutor code	Description of adult educational sector tutor affiliated with
TM1	Local HEI lifelong learning department
TM2	Local HEI community university initiative
TM3	Voluntary sector provider of adult education
TM4	Access to HE tutor
TM5	Access to HE tutor
TM6	Local HEI community university initiative
TF1	National lifelong learning advocacy body
TF2	Voluntary sector provider of adult education
TF3	Voluntary sector provider of adult education
TF4	Local HEI community university initiative
TF5	Local HEI community university initiative
TF6	Local HEI community university initiative
TF7	Local HEI community university initiative
TF8	Local HEI community university initiative
TF9	Access to HE tutor
TF10	Access to HE tutor

Appendix J. Summary of the research study given to access participants

I'd like to hear your story!

My name is Sarah Graves, and I'm a research student at the University of Glamorgan.

As part of my work I am listening to people's experiences of education as adults, with a particular focus on Access students, and I would like to hear your story.

Participation will involve having a conversation with me at a date and time that suit you. I am interested to hear about your experience of education and your reasons for undertaking the current course.

All stories will be kept strictly confidential and I would be delighted to meet with you. If you would like more information about taking part, please do contact me at:

Sarah Graves, Centre for Lifelong Learning
University of Glamorgan
scgraves@glam.ac.uk
Tel. 01443 654357

Thank you very much for taking the time to read this and I really look forward to meeting with you!



Appendix K. Student participant information sheet



Participation in Adult Education

Participant Information Sheet

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide whether or not to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully.

What is the purpose of the study?

The aim of this study is to explore participation in adult education. A key part of the study will involve exploring the views of adult learners on their personal learning journeys. This is a three-year study of which these discussions form the second stage.

Why have I been invited to participate?

This second phase seeks to explore the views of adult learners on their reasons for taking part in formal learning activities.

Do I have to take part?

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a consent form. If you decide to take part you are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason.

What will happen to me if I take part?

If you do decide to participate, you will be invited to have a conversation with Sarah Graves about your prior educational experience, motivations for taking part in adult education and life events that have shaped your feelings towards education and/or your own experience of it. The discussion is likely to take around 60 minutes subject to your availability and will be audio recorded if you agree to this.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

Although there are no financial benefits associated with taking part, it is hoped that the findings of the study will further our understanding of participation in lifelong learning. Your involvement will be sincerely appreciated and will impact on the breadth of the findings that emerge from this research with a view to impacting on our understanding of motivation to take part in adult education.

Will what I say in this study be kept confidential?

All information collected about individuals will be kept strictly confidential (subject to legal limitations). The real names of participants will be known only to the researcher, Sarah Graves, and her supervisory team at the University of Glamorgan. Professor Danny Saunders, Head of the Centre for Lifelong Learning, and Dr Robert Payne, Head of Outreach, are supervising the study. The names of all participants will be anonymised in the thesis and any related publications. All data associated with the research will be stored securely.

What will happen to the results of the research study?

The results of the research will be used in my doctoral thesis that is registered at the University of Glamorgan. Parts of the thesis may contribute to research publications and I would be happy to provide copies of any published research.

Who has reviewed the study?

This study has been discussed with the appropriate Ethics Officer at the University of Glamorgan.

Contact for further information

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7 Forest Grove (FG712), Treforest, CF37 1DL
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E-mail: scgraves@glam.ac.uk
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Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet.